The New Criterion

March 2003

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
Vuillard's mysteries *by Roger Kimball*, 5
Aboriginal "history" on film *by Keith Windschuttle*, 12
Paul Valéry *by Joseph Epstein*, 17
Peter Taylor today *by Richard Tillinghast*, 26
New poems *by Andrew Frisardi & Justine Cook*, 33

London journal: A tale of two Tonies *by John Gross*, 36; **Theater:** On youth & sandwiches *by Mark Steyn*, 39; **Art:** "Matisse Picasso" *by Karen Wilkin*, 44; Marsden Hartley *by James Panero*, 49; **Music** *by Jay Nordlinger*, 53; **Opera note:** Les Troyens *by James F. Penrose*, 57; **The media** *by James Bowman*, 59
Books: *Peter Wood* Diversity: the invention of a concept *reviewed by John Derbyshire*, 64; *Hermann Kurzke* Thomas Mann *reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers*, 68; *Doris Lessing* The sweetest dream *reviewed by Paul Hollander*, 71; *Christie Davies* The mirth of nations *reviewed by Kenneth Minogue*, 74;
Notebook: On the new library at Alexandria *by Theodore Dalrymple*, 77

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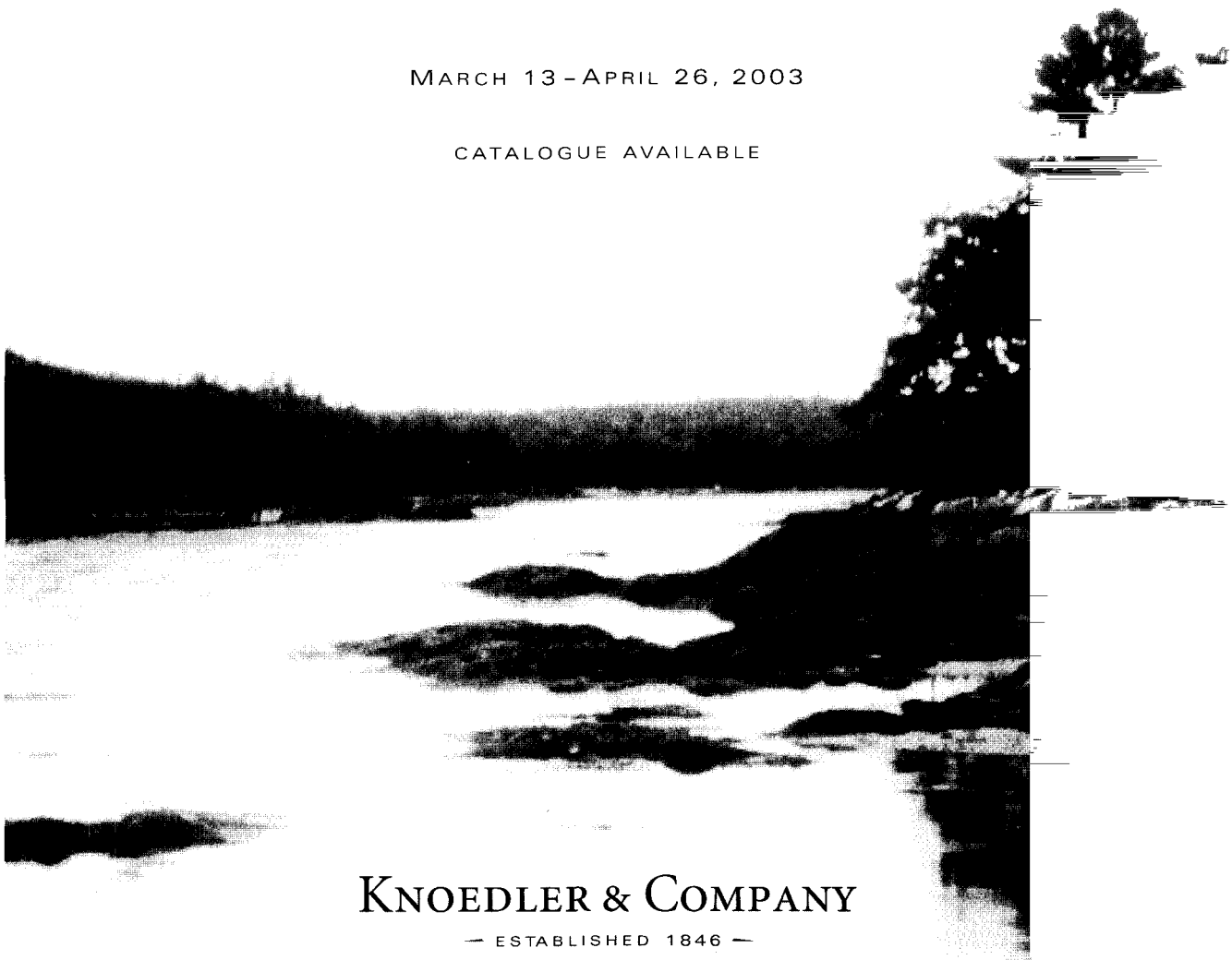

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The New Criterion *March 2003*

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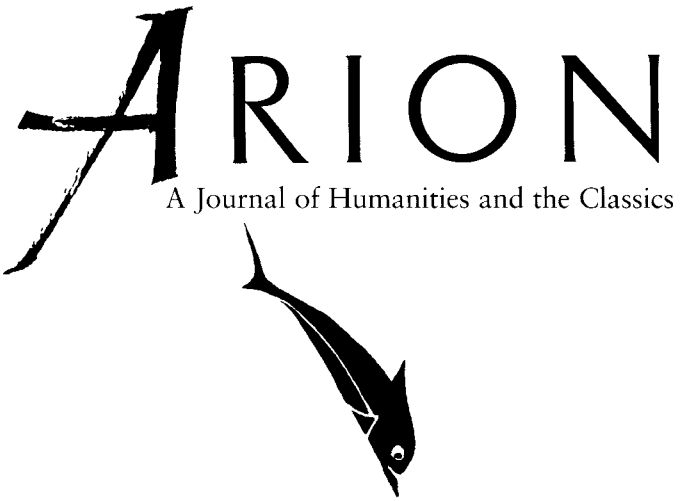

The grand sequence of the classical tradition, which extends in various strands through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the scientific Enlightenment and modern era, is actually a master paradigm for how to structure an authentically multicultural curriculum on a global scale. All students abroad as well as in the US need to learn the general contours of the world's major artistic and cultural traditions. These long channels of lineage can best be understood as streams—mighty rivers that are fed by tributaries and that are a confluence of mixed and varied material . . .

Camille Paglia, "The Mighty River of Classics"
Arion Volume IX, Number 2.

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Notes & Comments: March 2003

Squeals from the nursery

Perhaps Laura Bush should have known better. When she invited a group of poets and critics to the White House in February to celebrate American poetry, she counted on a literary crowd acting in a way that would serve literature. As everyone knows, she sharply underestimated the quotient of adolescent self-righteousness in this segment of the population. With the United States poised to rid the world of hideous tyranny in Iraq, it was simply business as usual when Sam Hamill, a poet and publisher, broadcast an email calling on his fellow scribes to boycott the event and organize a series of protests against the impending conflict. It was, as Mr. Hamill explicitly noted, a rerun of the 1960s, a chance to "reconstitute a Poets Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam."

The little pacifist dramas that erupted on college campuses and elsewhere across the country in February did not, despite the crowds they drew, amount to much. We witnessed a lot of self-congratulation, a lot of narcissistic grandstanding, and, where poets were involved, a seemingly endless amount of bad poetry. But the net effect was . . . nothing. Well, not quite nothing. One distinguished poet we know described the outbursts as "squeals from the nursery." That is exactly right. The pity is that those squeals monopolized the ink and the airtime, marginalizing the many sensible poets who, whatever their political orientation, are mature enough to know that one does not repay hospitality with bad behavior. We suspect that Mrs. Bush will think twice before extending another invitation to the poetry establishment: who can blame her? She sought to organize a literary event, and a few preening thugs managed to reinforce the image of poets as irresponsible dreamers.

No sane person can contemplate war without misgiving. But history shows that the pacifist option, far from preventing wars, generally makes them more deadly. In his book *Modern Times*, the historian Paul Johnson quotes from a candid secret briefing that Joseph Goebbels gave in April 1940, only weeks before the Nazis overran France and took Paris with hardly a shot. "Up to now," Goebbels wrote in this oft-quoted passage,

> we have succeeded in leaving the enemy in the dark concerning Germany's real goals, just as before 1932 our domestic foes never saw where we were going or that our oath of legality was just a trick. We wanted to come to power legally, but we did not want to use power legally. They could have suppressed us.

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> They could have arrested a couple of us in 1925 and that would have been that, the end. No, they let us through the danger zone. That's exactly how it was in foreign policy, too. . . . In 1933 a French premier ought to have said (and if I had been the French premier I would have said it): "The new Reich Chancellor is the man who wrote *Mein Kampf*, which says this and that. This man cannot be tolerated in our vicinity. Either he disappears or we march!" But they didn't do it. They left us alone and let us slip through the risky zone. . . . *And when we were done, and well armed, better than they, then they started the war!*

Hitler could have been easily stopped in 1936 when he remilitarized the Rhineland: the intellectuals of the time wouldn't hear of it. He could have been easily stopped in 1938 when he gobbled up Austria and then much of Czechoslovakia: Neville Chamberlain spoke for the *biens pensants* when he returned from Munich waving a piece of paper and declaring he had brought "peace in our time." Hitler might even have been stopped, though less easily, in 1939 after he invaded Poland, had the French acted decisively. Instead, the world was subjected to six years of horrific war.

Saddam Hussein has frankly acknowledged that Hitler and Stalin are his models, his heroes. Accordingly, no one should be surprised that he has tortured, maimed, and murdered hundreds of thousands of his own people and killed hundreds of thousands more in his predatory wars. Evidence of Hussein's appetite for acquiring chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons is beyond dispute, while evidence for his links to al Qaeda and other terrorist groups mounts daily. Where are the intellectuals marching to protest those things? As the journalist Barbara Amiel noted in the London *Daily Telegraph* a few days after the big anti-war protest there,

> The most revealing aspect of the anti-war march in London was what you did not see. You did not see any messages to Saddam Hussein or criticism of Iraqi policy. . . . If this were a genuine anti-war demonstration, why, along with demands on the British and Americans, would there be no demands of the other party to the conflict—Iraq? Commentators on the march were taken by the good order of it. I was taken by the sheer wickedness or naïveté. . . . All those nice middle-aged people from middle England with their children bundled up against the cold, marching for peace; did they have nothing to say to the party that had ignored 17 UN resolutions? A similar silence existed in all the anti-war marches in Europe. One either has to question the good faith of the marchers—or their brains.

Iraq is still, we must hope, in that "risky zone" that Goebbels spoke about. We can stop Hussein now. Or we can be forced to try to stop him later when he is capable of greater damage. What will it take? Another, perhaps even more devastating, 9/11? The poets and other protesters who pretend that George Bush is somehow more threatening than the tyrant who rules Iraq are the grave diggers not only of countless Iraqis but potentially also of many of their fellow Americans.

If they holler . . .

Dear Mrs. B.—Chops and Tomata sauce. Yours, Pickwick.

In 1908, Edith Wharton enthusiastically remarked that "the motor-car has restored the romance of travel." We can remember when we felt similarly about traveling by airplane. Of course, that was a long time ago. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, intrusive new security arrangements added another layer of indignity and irritation. But even before 9/11, travel by airplane—outside of first class, anyway—had become more and more like travel by cattle car. The delays were interminable, the crowding insuf-

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ferable, the food unspeakable. Everyone can recall times when passengers in an overcrowded plane scramble to stow their belongings "in the overhead bins or under the seat in front of you," as the industry-standard mantra puts it. Sometimes a few obstinate passengers are still loitering in the aisle when the time for departure comes. "Please take your seats," the flight attendant says over the PA system, explaining in varying tones of impatience that the plane may not leave the gate until everyone is seated with seat belts "securely fastened."

Many airline employees these days are unwelcoming, but occasionally we happen upon a friendly sort who tries humor instead of hectoring to achieve compliance. That, it turns out, is a dangerous tactic. Last month, the Associated Press reported that, two years ago, Jennifer Cundiff of Southwest Airlines tried the light touch on a flight returning from Las Vegas to Kansas City. "Eenie, meenie, minie, moe," she said using a rhyme learned from other Southwest flight attendants; "pick a seat, we gotta go."

A harmless rhyme? You might think so. But we live in an age when a mayoral aide who utters the word "niggardly" in public can be accused of racism. (That poor chap instantly offered his resignation.) Never mind that "niggardly" derives from a Scandinavian word meaning "scant" or "meager." Phonetically, it is ominously close to "nigger," and if *Huckleberry Finn* can be censored or proscribed because it contains the "N-word," how well can a hapless mayoral aide be expected to fare? How well, for that matter, will a flight attendant fare after uttering a rhyme that, in some other versions, sports the forbidden word?

Well, a mere employee is not likely to have deep pockets; the airline for which she works just might. And so two black women on that flight, concluding that the rhyme was an unconscionable example of racism directed at them, filed a discrimination lawsuit against Southwest Airlines seeking "unspecified compensatory and punitive damages." A U.S. District Judge dismissed the women's claims of physical and emotional distress, but nonetheless determined that the rhyme was "objectively racist and offensive."

In *The Pickwick Papers*, poor Mr. Pickwick is brought up on a bogus breach-of-promise suit by his scheming landlady—the widow Bardell—and an unscrupulous law firm. Two harmless notes, one specifying what he wants for dinner, another telling Mrs. Bardell not to trouble about a warming pan, are adduced as evidence of his matrimonial pledge. The whole thing is deliciously ridiculous, all the more so because Pickwick goes to debtors' prison rather than pay the fine ordered by the court. Bardell v. Pickwick forms a poignant episode in a very funny book. But *The Pickwick Papers* is a novel, a work of fiction. Meanwhile, the preposterous case against Southwest Airlines comes to trial March 4. The fines and prisons in *The Pickwick Papers* were a figment of Charles Dickens's imagination. Those of our overweening, politically correct judiciary are all too real.

Oleo olio

"The greatest American artist of his generation." That is how Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of *The New York Times*, described the video and performance artist Matthew Barney. You have probably heard of Matthew Barney by now. He was recently the subject of a long and respectful profile in *The New Yorker* by Calvin Tompkins. *The New York Times* has been singing his praises for years. In one signature work called "Field Dressing (Orifill)," this great artist is depicted in a video "climbing"—we quote Mr. Kimmelman—"naked up a pole and cables and applying dollops of Vaseline to his orifices."

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If you remain skeptical about Mr. Barney's achievement, you now have the opportunity to judge for yourself. A "major exhibition" of Mr. Barney's work (why are all exhibitions these days prefaced by the adjective "major"?) will be on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum through June 11. Fans of Mr. Barney's work will be pleased to know that "Cremaster," his five-part film cycle inspired by the muscle that raises and lowers the testicles, will be screened daily. The show hadn't opened when we went to press, so we cannot comment on the particulars of the exhibition. Nevertheless, we thought readers might like to know something about the preparations the Guggenheim had to make for this celebration of "the most important American artist of his generation." Genius, we know, can be demanding. *The New York Times* reminds us that it can be potentially messy as well. Among the logistical problems the Guggenheim faced in accommodating Mr. Barney's work was storing one ton of Vaseline at the proper temperature. This is "the most important American artist of his generation" we are talking about, so the Landmarks Preservation Commission was quick to give the Guggenheim permission to build a temporary wooden enclosure on the roof of its Frank Lloyd Wright building to keep the goo at the required air-conditioned temperature. Vaseline, the *Times* explained,

> will be seen running down the interior of the Guggenheim's rotunda in specially designed troughs. Frozen Vaseline will cover the front of an Art Deco bar. . . . [A] hidden hose, fed from the roof enclosure through the museum's lighting system, would keep the Vaseline on the bar at 17 degrees so it holds its shape.

The curator chiefly responsible for this homage to Mr. Barney described the exhibition as "among the most exhilarating" of all the "complex and eccentric exhibitions" the Guggenheim has mounted. Perhaps. It certainly threatens to be among the most oleaginous. Of course, visitors will be told not to touch the, ah, works of art. But it is reassuring to know that the Guggenheim promises to have "paper towels on hand" in case of accidents. It was Oscar Wilde who observed that life imitates art. The spectacle of Matthew Barney being hailed as "the most important American artist of his generation" and taking up valuable real estate in a premier New York museum for almost four months could have come straight from the acid satirical imaginings of Evelyn Waugh. What a swindle.

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Vuillard's mysteries

by Roger Kimball

No artist has ever so suggested the soul of an interior—the sense of habitation.
—Julius Meier-Graefe, on Vuillard

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.
—Wallace Stevens

. . . peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit.
—Stéphane Mallarmé

There are few artists whose signature work is as immediately likable but at the same time as difficult to plumb as that of Edouard Vuillard. His best work is both supremely fetching and quietly unfathomable: as easy, familiar, and welcome as dinnertime yet fraught with—what? Aldous Huxley was a great admirer of Vuillard's work. In an unpropitious moment, he declared that the painter was "the Dharma-Body manifested in the bourgeois bedroom." How that would have alarmed Vuillard! Quite right, too.

The Dharma-Body aside, there *is* something enigmatic about Vuillard's charm. He died in 1940, in his seventy-second year. His work is indisputably "modern"—the critic Julius Meier-Graefe described it as Cézanne "translated into more intimate terms"—yet in many respects it seems to hail from a previous vintage. Vuillard's lifelong friend Pierre Bonnard was a year older but seems, taken all in all, almost a generation younger.[1] Why?

It is hard to say. Size is one ingredient, at least for some pictures. Many of Vuillard's best-known works are quite small, hardly bigger than a sheet of foolscap, yet they register an abundance of emotion—too much, it seems, for the available real estate. There is also the issue of obliqueness, a sort of painterly double-take. Vuillard implicated an element of hindsight, of *déjà-vu*, into every first impression. He was a very private man: hard to know. Great revelations were expected when his voluminous journals were published a decade ago. They added details—there was this mistress and that luncheon party, sketches and doodles galore of people and scenes. The Journals also provide some amusing gossip. "Go to Isadora Duncan's," Vuillard scribbled in 1915, "received with great coquetry, long idle chats ending with me kissing her." But Vuillard's coquetry is even greater than Duncan's: the man in whole continues to deliquesce.

1 Though Meier-Graefe did perhaps exaggerate when he wrote that "There are superficial observers who cannot distinguish Bonnard from Vuillard. They have as much in common as André Theuriet and Pierre Louÿs; they both speak French." Well, Vuillard sometimes spoke "Bonnard," as, for example, in the Bonnardesque decorations for Bois-Lurette, the Bernheim Villa in Normandy (1912–1913).

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We come to Vuillard as we come to his pictures, askew, missing part of the plot. His pictures tend to occupy that capacious, half-lit storeroom of feeling where preeminence is guaranteed more by affection than by dispassionate evaluation. They are part of the family: somehow *our* family, once-removed. Everything is once-removed. Intimacy—the one inescapable word when we come to Vuillard—is both imperative and baffled, lonely. Vuillard went to extraordinary lengths to nurture that janus-faced intimacy. We are not surprised to learn that he lived with his mother—his "muse," as he often said—until her death in 1928, when he was sixty. She was the bulwark of his world: a *mundus muliebris* (the phrase crops up often in the literature on Vuillard), which doted on Vuillard as its immovable center.

It was not entirely a feminine world, though. The painter Kerr-Xavier Roussel was probably Vuillard's closest friend. They met at the Lycée Condorcet. That fabled Parisian school, which, one critic noted, pursued "a ferocious unrelenting, all-demanding attitude toward knowledge," also introduced Vuillard to many life-long friends: Bonnard, Maurice Denis, and others. The handsome, outgoing Roussel was a notorious womanizer. Vuillard's solution was to encourage him to marry his sister, Marie. It did not stop Roussel's amorous adventures, but it did help safeguard Vuillard's homelife, assuring him of Roussel's continued presence.

Born in Cuiseaux, some three hundred miles from Paris, Vuillard was the youngest of three children. His father, twenty-seven years his mother's senior, was a retired soldier who turned to tax collecting when invalided out of the army. (Vuillard remembers seeing Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, at that time among the most famous painters in France, pull up in his tilbury to pay his taxes.) The Vuillards moved to Paris in 1877. Young Edouard, strictly educated by the Marist priests, had planned to follow his father and brother into the army. "I could think of nothing else," he recalled, "in which I could possibly distinguish myself." By the time his father died, in 1884, he had begun to dabble in art. By the end of the decade, encouraged by Roussel and others, he had thrown himself into it. Vuillard, who did nothing lightly, later recalled that it was outside a stationer's in the Passage de Havre that he finally decided to become a full time painter. It seems odd that so original an artist as Vuillard should find as teachers the arch-academicians Gérôme (at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts) and Bouguereau (Académie Julian). But then it turned out that Vuillard discovered his real teachers among his friends and, even more, among the masterpieces he studied at the Louvre.

A typical picture by Vuillard—of seamstresses at work in his mother's dress shop, of a family dining, of a couple communing over music—stays in the mind as much by the tone or atmosphere it diffuses as by the scene it delineates. Even when painting people in conversation, he seems to focus on the moments between words, the pauses in which emotions flicker and shift, in which new thoughts are born. In his book on the Symbolist movement, Robert Goldwater spoke in this context of

> devotion to the effective sum of infinite suggestion, the indirect glance which catches reality unawares. . . . In the end a heavily laden psychological atmosphere pushes through the surface of domestic ordinariness, unifying the whole with a sense of charged personal relations more real than any analytic phenomenal observation.

In such pictures, the prime incident is elsewhere. The stone has been dropped offstage. Vuillard's canvases register not the plunge but the retreating ripples of emotion and chromatic harmony. They speak softly yet echo long. "We enjoy the same sort of intimacy with him as in conversation with certain agreeable people," Meier-Graefe wrote in the early 1900s, "when the talk results in a mutual perception of subtle things, when thoughts no longer require words for their interchange, and we are silent lest we disturb them."

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If this sounds like one version of French exquisiteness, well, yes: Vuillard knew (slightly) and admired Mallarmé; he turned down—how Proustian that gesture!—an offer to illustrate *Un Amour de Swann*. Vuillard was a canny psychologist—he kept his eyes every bit as open as did Proust—but he also kept his canniness intact: he painted, he did not expatiate. His exquisiteness, in other words, was pragmatic, down-to-earth. His appeal, strange to say, is visceral, if delicately so. His work lodges as firmly in the blood as does any art, but its importunities are decorous—or at least discreet. Vuillard was present at the first reading of Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés"; when asked what he thought, he only smiled. Another guest that evening said Vuillard seemed totally bemused.

All of which is to say that Vuillard was a complex, many-sided character. Just how many-sided we can now see in the mammoth traveling exhibition of his work currently on view at the National Gallery in Washington.[2] The catalogue lists three-hundred and thirty-four works. Not every object will be shown at every venue, but in Washington the viewer is all-but-overwhelmed by the scale of the exhibition: paintings in various media, lithographs, drawings, more paintings—portraits and self-portraits, screens, wall-decorations—dozens of photographs.

The photographs were a surprise. Vuillard acquired his Kodak in 1897. He must have been a bit of a bore with it: "Hold, please!" *Click* . . . Vuillard was extremely assiduous in minuting his life. His journals are part of the record. The 1,750 photographic "memoranda" he left behind are another. They are fascinating, the photographs. How could they fail to be? "Pierre Bonnard, Rue des Batignolles," "Odilon Redon in Saint-Georges de Didonne," "Auguste Renoir in his Studio," "Kerr-Xavier Roussel dancing nude, Rue Truffaut." Are the photographs more than historical curiosities? A few, perhaps, especially some of Vuillard's mother. Most of them, however, are more of anthropological or anecdotal than aesthetic interest: a picnic with one mistress, luncheon with another, on the road to Grenada with a friend.

This exhibition is as complete as any exhibition of Vuillard's work is ever likely to be. Missing are some immovable large-scale decorations—for the Comédie des Champs-Elysées (1912), for example—and the odd important picture: *Married Life* (*c.* 1894), for example, a quietly harrowing, atmospheric oil depicting a distraught couple. The figures in that famous painting are Vuillard's sister, Marie, and Roussel, suspended in grim silence after Marie has delivered a stillborn baby. A high chair stands in the background between the couple, useless now but still recriminating.

But occasional omissions aside, this exhibition presents a very full record of Vuillard's artistic activity. Many familiar works are here: the Gauguinesque *Self-portrait with Cane and Straw Hat* (*c.* 1891), *Lunchtime* (1892), *The Yellow Curtain* (*c.* 1893), *A Family Evening* (1895), *The Table: End of a Lunch at the Vuillard Home* (*c.* 1895), and a dozen others. As the dates suggest, the 1890s were Vuillard's great decade: before was mostly apprentice stuff—working through, assimilating Corot, Puvis, Gauguin, Seurat—afterwards came much superb work, but never again in such profusion.

One of the high points of the exhibition—of Vuillard's entire career—is the suite of wall panels he did for his friends Thadée and Misia Natanson. *The Striped Blouse* (1895) from the National Gallery and *The Tapestry* (1895) from the Museum of Modern Art will be familiar to many: they

2 "Edouard Vuillard" is on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from January 19–April 20, 2003. It then travels to The Montreal Museum of Art, Montreal (May 15–August 24, 2003), Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris (September 23, 2003–January 4, 2004), and the Royal Academy of Arts, London (January 31–April 18, 2004). A catalogue of the exhibition, by Guy Cogeval, et al., has been copublished by The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery of Art, Washington (528 pages, $65).

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are gorgeous signature works. The other panels, from private collections, are less well-known but no less spectacular. Vuillard met Thadée Natanson in 1891, the year he and his brother founded *La Revue blanche*. It was a moment—long since past—when "avant-garde" and "aesthetic quality" were not antithetical terms. Throughout its eleven-year run, *La Revue blanche* was the premier avant-garde journal in France—perhaps anywhere. It was also among the best. When the Berlin Philharmonic came to Paris, it was Debussy who reported on the visit. Mallarmé's poem "Tennyson" first appeared in its pages. The journal's general secretary was Félix Fénéon. Léon Blum was among the regular contributors. Bonnard contributed frontispieces, as did Vuillard. The journal cast its net wide. "It was," one critic noted,

> as interested in Bismarck's birthday as in the new opera by Mascagni, on which F. T. Marinetti . . . reported from La Scala. Thadée Natanson's first article on art, in 1893, had to do with Utamaro and Hiroshige; and any reader who took *La Revue blanche* for a review of an other-worldly aesthetical character would have acknowledged his mistake after working through the very long articles in which the aesthetician Charles Henry discussed the question "How should a bicyclist train for maximum endurance?"

The world of *La Revue blanche* became part of Vuillard's world, part, so to speak, of his family. It even provided him with another muse, competition for his mother, in the person of Misia Natanson. Vuillard, if not in love with Misia, was certainly infatuated by her. But then enchantment seems to have been prominent among that extraordinary woman's gifts. An accomplished pianist, Misia had been a prize student of Gabriel Fauré. She won high praise from Liszt. She was mistress of a brilliant salon. Mallarmé wrote a poem about her. Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec (another *Revue* stalwart), Bonnard, and Vuillard all painted her portrait. In Vuillard's pictures, she emerges as a strong but somewhat melancholy character, distracted and self-absorbed, qualities abundantly confirmed by her somewhat fantastical autobiography.

It is a testimony to Vuillard's power that one can walk through rooms full of familiar paintings and still have one's breath taken away. Meier-Graefe noted that "there is always something in the background with [Vuillard]. It is possible to have one of his interiors in the house for a month, and one fine day to discover a figure in the corner, and not only a figure, but a whole story." This exhibition confirms Meier-Graefe's observation and raises it to a higher power. For it turns out that there is also often something in the foreground with Vuillard, something which, whether or not one has noticed it, nevertheless has the power to absorb one's attention like (if I may so put it) an old friend seen for the first time.

I said that there is a lot that is familiar in this exhibition. But it is also the case that Vuillard emerges as a much more various artist than most of us have known. He also, I believe, emerges as a greater artist than we may remember—though the greatness does not flow from the variousness. On the contrary, this exhibition shows that Vuillard made several forays that, if not exactly wrong turns, were at least diluting expenditures. For one thing, Vuillard found it difficult to work on a large scale without losing that pregnant, if hard-to-define, quality that infuses his best small works. Occasionally, he managed it. Some of the Natanson panels, for example, are quite large, as are the remarkable violet-hued paintings in the suite of decorations he did for Dr. Henri Vaquez in 1896. (What a sequence of Vuillard-esque titles those four *Figures in an Interior* present! "Work," "Choosing a Book," "Intimacy," "Music.") Generally, however, as Vuillard's paintings became larger, they also became less concentrated.

Vuillard also had his special subjects, subjects that spoke most responsively to his genius. In brief, the closer to his extended family circle Vuillard remained, the more

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powerful his paintings. One of the surprises of this exhibition was how far afield from such subjects Vuillard probed. Who would have thought that Vuillard, in his capacity as official war artist, would paint a German prisoner of war being interrogated (1917)? It is in some ways a remarkable picture; but is it a Vuillard? One has similarly ambivalent feelings about paintings like *The Surgeons* (1912–1914), a sort of updated, post-Impressionist version of Eakins's *Gross Clinic*. It's an impressive work. But I am not sure it is an impressive Vuillard.

By the end of his career, Vuillard was a very famous artist, much in demand by the rich as a portraitist. Vuillard famously declared that "I don't paint portraits. I paint people in their homes." But after about 1915 Vuillard's depictions of people and places—of people *in* places—tend to lose the conviction and mysteriousness that stamp much of his earlier work. Sometimes, that loss came with greater specificity. We tend to think of a Vuillard portrait as an essay in Impressionism: Debussy on canvas. But by the 1920s and 1930s, Vuillard was becoming more and more particularistic. The Countess Anna de Noailles, waiting for Vuillard to come to paint her portrait, admonished her maid: "For heaven's sake put away that cold cream. You know how Monsieur Vuillard never leaves anything out." Still, there are some remarkable pictures from his late period—*The "Voiles de Gênes" Boudoir* (1931), for example, a portrait of Madame Fernand Javal, wife of an important *parfumeur*. Vuillard manages to enlist the garish electric lights to an almost Chardinesque purpose: the room is overlit but almost as an effective stage set might be. In general, though, the more public Vuillard became the less distinctive was his work.

It has often been noted that Vuillard's best paintings have a signal dramatic quality—intense, though almost plotless, his protagonists suspended in a wordless amber of insinuation. Not for nothing did Vuillard begin his career in association with his old school friend Aurélien Marie Lugné—Lugné-Poe, as he became, apparently in homage to that other Poe, Edgar Allan. Lugné-Poe—actor, director, producer, all-round cultural impresario—brought the work of modernists like Ibsen, Maeterlinck, and Strindberg to the Paris stage in the 1890s.

Vuillard was an inveterate theater-goer, a theater-collaborator. One of his first jobs was to design programs and design and paint stage sets for Lugné-Poe's new *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre* (Vuillard contributed the name), where Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* and *The Master Builder* had their Paris debuts. Vuillard often painted with oil on canvas. But it was while working for the theater that he developed his technique of *peinture à la colle*, painting with heated glue into which pigment had been mixed. Often he painted on unfinished cardboard. The process helped him achieve the lush surface and warm colors he loved, but it also proved to be a great danger for collectors. Attempting to brighten up his paintings, they not infrequently had them varnished. If the cardboard had been completely covered with paint, the varnish did no harm; but if there were any areas exposed, the varnish would soak into the cardboard, leaving dark brown spots that disfigured the painting forever.

A number of Vuillard's theater programs survive. None of his stage sets do. All those flats—quickly painted and then repainted when the next production loomed—are lost. There are not even any sketches to hint at what the ensemble looked liked. But it is easy to imagine that Vuillard's paintings from that period—those small, jewel-like portraits and domestic scenes—are distilled notes for a misplaced drama of his own invention. One critic called Vuillard a "micro-dramatist." Many of his pictures from the 1890s underscore the word's aptness.

That said, the Ibsen-Strindberg connection can be overstated. Mallarmé's famous letter of 1864 to Henri Cazalis, in which he speaks of his efforts to invent a new poetic language and his ambition to "paint not the thing, but the effect the thing produces," is often quoted in discussions of Vuillard.

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More à propos, perhaps, is the even more famous line from "Brise Marine": "La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres." *Triste* is the *mot juste*. Vuillard's world inflects several degrees of sadness. But the sadness never descends to hysteria, menace, or even unadulterated angst. Vuillard's shyness, his love of comfort, and above all his essential sanity were too great for that.

In 1971, the Art Gallery of Ontario mounted a substantial exhibition of Vuillard's work—not as large as the current omnibus, but substantial nonetheless. The curator was the critic John Russell, whose catalogue essay is still one of the very best things written about the artist. Among other things, it offers a corrective—a series of correctives—to the temptation of casting Vuillard in the wrong sort of drama. "It might be true, in one sense," Russell notes,

> that our destinies were played out in a Nordic twilight, essence against essence, spirit against invisible spirit. But meanwhile there was a good meal on the stove, and amusing things were being said, and people were getting on with life much as they had always done, and on every hand there was something to be looked at, and something to be got down on paper, and much to rejoice at in the play of one individual nature against another. Vuillard was not vivacious in society, but in his work he had the kind of sharp-focused understanding that is more enlivening, in the end, than any amount of boisterous high spirits. The particular won out, in his art, against the general.

Vuillard's theatricality was the unhistrionic drama of patient observation: wry, witty, empathetic or sardonic as the occasion demanded, but never extreme. (There was never, Russell notes, anything "wayward or bohemian about Vuillard.") The lushness and muted ambience of many of Vuillard's most familiar pictures have led us to neglect the animating element of wit, rarely absent from his pictures. In the end, Russell wrote, Vuillard's "subject was the human comedy as it is lived out in Paris, and he saw it as a born dramatist would see it."

We tend to think of Vuillard primarily as an indoor, even a hot-house, phenomenon. His best-known works—most of them—are of confined or at least plush interiors. This association of Vuillard with the parlor began early. In 1891 and 1892, when he was still in his early twenties, Vuillard, together with Bonnard and others in their circle, contributed to group shows of Impressionist and Symbolist work at Le Barc de Bouteville. Writing about the 1892 exhibition, the critic Gustave Geoffroy, noting that Bonnard and Vuillard both had "the gift of nuance," dilated in particular on "M. Vuillard's interiors, his *Reclining Woman*, his *Woman Mending*, his *Luncheon*, [which] prove him to be . . . an intimist with a delicious sense of humor. He knows how to be funny and sad, all at once, with a hand that is as sure as it is light."

It would be difficult to improve on that. Still, it is worth stressing that the "intimist" Vuillard was in his own quiet fashion something of a boulevardier—one might almost say a *flâneur*, taking a page from Baudelaire, did the word not connote a very un-Vuillardesque idleness and insouciance. Unlike Baudelaire's dandy, Vuillard was, in Russell's phrase, "conscientiousness personified." Above all, Vuillard was a tireless observer. The humble fabric of everyday life—infinitely trivial, utterly absorbing—was his purview. It fueled his pathos, it underwrote his humor. "If people came to call," Russell noted,

> he watched them narrowly, as clever children watch their elders. If his mother sat mending her stockings, he noted exactly the point of maximum tension, somewhere just above the elbows. He could not see a door without wondering who would come through it, or look at a park bench without wondering who had sat on it last. He was witty, and observant, and he took nothing for granted.

All of which was a prescription for lucid

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emotional accuracy, however gorgeous the embroidery with which it was presented.

In the art-history books, Vuillard is dutifully identified as a member of the Nabis, the close-knit group of school friends whose founding members included Vuillard, Bonnard, Roussel, and Denis (the theoretician of the group, in so far as it had one). "Nabi" is Hebrew for "prophet," and some members went in for the usual hierophantic accoutrements—special clothes, symbols, and so on—but neither Vuillard nor Bonnard had any truck with that sort of thing. (Vuillard, Russell observed, was "one of the least cranky men who ever lived.") One fact about the Nabis to keep in mind is the astonishing youth of its founding proponents. Denis was still nineteen when he famously admonished, in his *Définition du néo-traditionnisme*, that we "remember that before it is a warhorse, a naked woman, or a trumpery anecdote, a painting is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." (A recapitulation, for painters, of Mallarmé's observation that "You don't make a poem with ideas, but with words"? Perhaps.) Vuillard was happy to be called a Nabi if that meant consorting with friends, indulging in agreeable conversation, and pursuing shared aesthetic passions. But he was as undoctrinaire about the Nabis' program as he was about every other program. "I have," he wrote to Denis in 1898, "a horror (or, rather, an absolute terror) of general ideas that I have not arrived at by myself."

The curator of this stupendous exhibition is Guy Cogeval, director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and author of an eighteen-hundred-page critical catalogue of Vuillard's works. Cogeval is very learned about Vuillard. He has many illuminating things to say about his work.

He also, unfortunately, has some supremely silly things to say. Opening the catalogue at random, my eye fell on the title of the first section: "Permanent Transgression": not a propitious overture, since one thing Vuillard most definitely was not was "transgressive." Well, a title is only a title. Unfortunately, Cogeval's long essay was not an improvement. Of an early self-portrait, he assures readers that Vuillard "here . . . reveals his narcissistic fear of death and castration, conjured by the appearance in the image of a double, the *Doppelgänger* dear to Otto Rank," etc. Really? What planet did that fall from? Everyone who studies Vuillard remarks on the close, feminine environment of his home. But what does it mean to say that his home "provided Vuillard with a solid base in the general flux of signs." Have we strayed into a seminar on structuralism? Discussing Vuillard's sister, Cogeval speaks of Vuillard's "Expressionist scenes where the mother exerts an almost sado-masochistic power over her daughter." The picture he adduces is *The Conversation* (1891–1892): take a look. Find any traces of sado-masochism? No? Then scrutinize *Doctor Louis Viau* (1936–1937), a portrait of the doctor in his office surrounded by medical paraphernalia. According to Cogeval, the medical instruments "irresistibly evoke instruments of torture": be assured that most people will find it perfectly easy to resist. I do not particularly care for Vuillard's portrait of Countess Anna de Noailles, but can it really be said that Vuillard let himself go "with bloodthirsty delight" in creating an unflattering portrait?

Cogeval, I suspect, thinks that his outré interpretations will make Vuillard more appealing to our demotic, post-everything sensibility. He makes sure that Vuillard is supplied with a full complement of sexual adventures and low motives. Vuillard's match-making of his sister and Roussel is "quite mad and extremely selfish." Vuillard's humor—for many of us, one of the artist's most exquisite achievements—is for Cogeval "savage." Perhaps all this is supposed to make Vuillard more accessible. The consolation is that it leaves the essential Vuillard completely untouched. We close the book and return to the gallery. Vuillard's mysteries are undisturbed.

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Rabbit-Proof Fence: "a true story"?

by Keith Windschuttle

The Australian-born Hollywood film director Phillip Noyce built most of his career on thrillers and action adventures, but this year he has simultaneously released onto the market two highly political films. One is his adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* set in Vietnam in the 1950s. In Noyce's hands, the film outdoes even the novelist's anti-Americanism and support for the Communists then trying to take control of the country.

The second film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, is ostensibly an adventure story of female bravery and ingenuity in which three Aboriginal girls escape from an oppressive institution in Western Australia and make a fifteen-hundred-mile journey back to their home. In reality it is a work every bit as politically committed as Greene's. If anything, the anti-Australianism of the latter film outdoes the anti-Americanism of the former.

Rabbit-Proof Fence opens by declaring it is "a true story." Its script is a combination of a fictionalized memoir written by Doris Pilkington, whose mother was one of the three runaways, plus the 1997 report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, entitled *Bringing Them Home*. The latter is possibly the most contentious government document ever published in Australia. The commission claimed that Aboriginal child-removal policies from the 1930s to 1970 amounted to "genocide" and that the Australian government owed those affected a public apology plus large amounts of monetary compensation. Writing in *The Washington Post* on February 2, 2003 the Melbourne academic Robert Manne endorsed the report and commended the film: "No episode in the country's history," Manne wrote, "is more ideologically sensitive than the story of what are now called the 'stolen generations.'"

The film depicts a typical scene portrayed by the report. In 1930, a policeman forcibly removes screaming children from their mother at Jigalong in the north-west of the continent. They are conveyed under brutal conditions to the Moore River Native Settlement, an institution resembling a concentration camp. The children are half-caste Aborigines and the rationale for their removal is justified by the chief protector of natives in Western Australia, an English-born public servant named A. O. Neville, played in the film by Kenneth Branagh. He explains to a group of white ladies that his objective is to "breed out the color" by separating half-caste children from other Aborigines.

He believes the declining full-blood Aboriginal population is doomed to die out. The number of half-castes, though, are rapidly increasing and threatening the political ideal of a White Australia. Half-caste children who remain with their mothers in blacks camps are likely to breed back into the Aboriginal population. If, however, they can be removed while children and then reared in institutions,

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they will marry other half-castes, quarter-castes, or whites. Eventually, this eugenics-inspired policy would see the Aboriginal race virtually eliminated. According to the Human Rights Commission report, between 1910 and 1970 these policies caused from ten to thirty per cent of all Australian Aborigines to be forcibly removed from their families. Using definitions adopted by the United Nations, it said this amounted to genocide.

The three girls who star in the film represent Aboriginal resistance to these plans. They escape the settlement and are pursued by the authorities, who use all the modern world's communications and transportation technology at their disposal. By following the rabbit-proof fence, however—which was built to keep a rabbit plague in the east from spreading to the farming and grazing lands of the west coast—and by trusting their native ingenuity and knowledge of their environment, two of the girls eventually make it back home.

Australian audiences for the film have been invariably moved by the girls' plight, made angry at their white oppressors, and left in tears at the heroism of their great trek. This summer, the film has been the major box office success and won the Australian Film Institute award for best picture. Noyce used his acceptance speech to criticize the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard for refusing to apologize to the Aborigines and also for exploiting fears of illegal Muslim immigrants. The government's last election victory, Noyce said, was based on "an exploitation of race hatred." As a result, Australia had "lost its humanity."

Despite this, a number of influential critics of the "stolen generations" report and of Noyce's film have emerged. They have argued that the only exploitation involved has been of the credulity of the public who, in both cases, have been fed gross misrepresentations of Australian history. Rather than being stolen from loving parents to fulfill a nationalist policy of racist eugenics, the only cases where Aboriginal children were removed involved serious parental neglect. In many of these cases, the parents were alcoholics who were not providing proper nutrition or health care and the authorities would have been culpable had they not acted. In some Aboriginal communities, half-caste children were treated as outcasts, especially the girls who became easy sexual prey for both whites and blacks. In some tribes, half-caste children were commonly subject to infanticide.

Forcible removals, like that depicted in the film, were rare. Indeed, the scene Noyce created is pure fiction since, according to the book, Molly was taken without a struggle and with the acquiescence of her stepfather who was present at the time. Moreover, institutions like that depicted in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* usually housed Aboriginal children placed voluntarily by their parents to be educated. Evidence from a 1934 enquiry showed that of the 1,067 admitted to the Moore River Native Settlement, only sixty-four were unattended or orphan children. That is, only 6 percent could possibly have been removals from their mothers. Yet the film depicts them all as stolen children.

The Human Rights Commission based its entire report on claims made by Aborigines themselves and did not test their evidence by calling witnesses from among the officials who allegedly removed them. Three test cases subsequently came before the courts, accompanied by claims for compensation. The evidence of the litigants contrasted dramatically with the records of their removal. In one case, a baby boy had been placed in a rabbit burrow by his grandmother and left to die. He was rescued later by his aunt. His teenage mother subsequently agreed to place him in an orphanage. Despite sympathetic judges, none of the three claimants could demonstrate they were forcibly removed, and no government policies were found to support a racist or "stolen generation" thesis.

Documentary evidence also emerged to show that some high-profile Aborigines who

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claimed to have been stolen had invented their stories. Fabricators included the former head of the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Commission, Lois O'Donoghue, whose white father had placed her and her sisters in a Catholic boarding school where he paid for their upkeep.

At the same time, descendants of A. O. Neville sprang to his defense, producing a biography and a string of documents from his career to demonstrate that, far from being a racist who wanted to see the Aborigines die out, he had dedicated his life to their well-being. When he died, his wife received about 500 letters from Aborigines praising his efforts to rescue abandoned children and protect them from exploitation.

In other words, rather than demonstrating that Australia had "lost its humanity," Aboriginal policy has consistently been based on humanitarian intentions. This is not to say these aims have been uniformly successful. While 70 percent of people of Aboriginal descent now live in urban areas where large numbers are socially indistinguishable from other Australians, the 30 percent who still live in remote outback communities suffer endemic poverty, poor health and education, as well as rising incidences of alcoholism and domestic violence. Humanitarian intervention, which has usually involved Christian missionaries trying to provide health and education services in these remote areas, has a poor record of success compared to that of the gradual, individual, and unassisted assimilation of Aboriginal people into mainstream society.

When Phillip Noyce recruited the three girls who were to star in his film, he chose them from outback communities in Western Australia. He found the eldest, Everlyn Sampi, who was to play fourteen-year-old Molly in the film, living with her mother at Broome on the north-west coast. A striking number of parallels emerged between the young actress and the character she played. Both had white fathers who had left their mothers. Neither was educated. Molly had attracted the attention of the authorities because of reports she was "running wild with the whites" and was being abused by the full-blood members of her tribe. Everlyn had reached puberty but could not read or write, was regularly truant from school, and Noyce himself became worried about her return to Broome and the life she would lead after the film was made. During rehearsals, Everlyn emulated her character and ran away twice. She was found in a telephone booth trying to book a ticket back to Broome. She was caught and returned to Noyce, who told a journalist her behavior "makes you want to protect her, adopt her."

Noyce decided to do just that. With her mother's consent, he arranged for her to enter a boarding school near Perth. But again, just like Molly, she hated it and demanded to be flown home. Last year a television reporter, James Thomas, confronted Noyce with the parallels between his own actions and those of his film's chief villain, the Aboriginal protector Neville.

> Thomas: Picture this: a white man enters a remote Aboriginal community with the best intentions, takes three girls out of their community and promises them fame and fortune. Does it sound familiar?
>
> Noyce: Mmm-hmm.
>
> Thomas: Are you aware of the irony that exists in what you are doing with this film and the actual topic of the film itself?
>
> Noyce: Well, I suppose in one way you could say that in a different context, in a different time, I'm A. O. Neville promising these young Aboriginal children a better life, asking them to do things that are against their instincts, perhaps because it's for their own good. But we do live in a slightly different world.

While we obviously do live in a different world, Noyce himself succumbed to an instinct that is as old as the British settlement of Australia: the desire to offer Aboriginal people the benefits of civilized life and to educate their children in the ways of the modern world.

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If this is true, though, why would Australia's artists and intellectuals have become so uniformly intent on portraying their own country in such bleak terms, regularly comparing Aboriginal policy to the intentions of the Nazis towards the Jews? Among the most visible of the symbols of this attitude is the new National Museum of Australia whose central construction—shaped as a lightning bolt striking the land—is borrowed from the Jewish Museum in Berlin in order to signify that the Aborigines suffered the equivalent of the Holocaust. The museum's director described its opening, which coincided with the centenary of federation, as "a birthday gift to Australia," but symbolically to accuse the nation of the most terrible crime possible was a strange present. Yet, apart from a handful of conservative objectors, the country largely accepted it without demur.

The reason is the consensus reached by the university-based historians of Aboriginal Australia over the past thirty years. This consensus now commands an overwhelming majority of support in the media, the arts, the universities, and the public service. In addition to inventing the "stolen generations" thesis—which originated in 1982 in a book by Peter Read of the Australian National University—academic historians have created a picture of widespread mass killings on the frontiers of the nineteenth-century colonies that not only went unpunished but had covert government support. Some of these colonies engaged in what the principal historian of race relations in Tasmania, Lyndall Ryan, has called "a conscious policy of genocide."

In 2000 I began a project to re-assess the evidence for this frontier warfare and the massacres that purportedly accompanied it. The project began in Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land as it was known until 1855, about which I originally expected to write a single chapter. In re-reading all the archival evidence and double-checking all the claims by historians, however, I found such a wealth of material, including some of the most hair-raising breaches of historical practice imaginable, that Van Diemen's Land has become the subject of the first of what will eventually be a three-volume series entitled *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. The first book was published in early December by Macleay Press and has ever since been part of a virulent and frequently vicious debate in the press.

Van Diemen's Land is widely regarded as Australia's worst-case scenario, indeed, one of the few cases of outright genocide in the British Empire. International writers now routinely compare the British in this colony with the Spaniards in Mexico, the Belgians in the Congo, the Turks in Armenia, and Pol Pot in Cambodia.

My own reconsideration of the evidence comes to a completely different conclusion. In all of Europe's colonial encounters with the New Worlds of the Americas and the Pacific, Van Diemen's Land was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed. In the entire period from 1803, when the colonists arrived, to 1834, when all but one family of Aborigines had been removed to a sanctuary on Flinders Island, racial conflict resulted in a plausible death toll of one-hundred and eighteen of the original inhabitants, less than four deaths a year.

It is true the original 2000 full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines did die out in the nineteenth century (although they left a trail of mixed-blood descendants who today number about 16,000 out of a total population of 500,000). The demise of the original inhabitants was almost entirely a consequence of two factors: their ten-thousand-year isolation since the last ice age that had left them vulnerable to introduced diseases, especially influenza, pneumonia, and tuberculosis; and the fact that the men traded and prostituted their women to white stockmen and sealers to such an extent that they lost the ability to reproduce themselves.

None of this involved genocide, which requires murderous intention against a whole race of people. The ruling ideas of the age, both in England and the colonies, favored

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the conciliation of the Aborigines. Van Diemen's Land was colonized at a time when British society and politics were strongly influenced by a revival of Christian Evangelicalism, expressed in the successful campaign to end slavery, and by the philosophy of the English and Scottish Enlightenment, which emphasized the unity of humankind. The colonial governors and leading settlers not only held these ideas, they publicly expressed and acted upon them. While they suspected their convict lower orders of abusing the Aborigines, their main aim was to prevent this from happening. Their intent was to civilize and modernize the Aborigines, not exterminate them.

On the Aborigines' side, despite the claims of academic historians, there was nothing that resembled frontier warfare, patriotic struggle, or systematic resistance of any kind. What historians call the "Black War" of Van Diemen's Land from 1824–1831 began as a minor crime wave by two Europeanized black bushrangers, followed by an outbreak of robbery and murder by tribal Aborigines.

In both Tasmania and the mainland, many Aborigines willingly accommodated themselves to the newcomers. They were drawn to and became part of the new society. Many others, however, were subject to a policy that kept them separated from the white population. The system of segregated missions and reserves that emerged in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries was, in my view, the worst crime that Australia committed against the Aborigines. The missionaries and government officials who initiated this strategy claimed it was to protect them from white violence and white exploitation. They originated this thesis in order to provide a rationale for their own institutions and to provide themselves with a captive audience.

There is no doubt that the segregation was often undertaken with the best of intentions. The missionaries saw themselves fulfilling the evangelical and humanitarian traditions of their own culture. In exaggerating the conflict that did occur, however, and in accepting as true a range of myths, rumors, and frontier yarns about violence, they left a legacy of assertions which academic historians have seized upon over the last thirty years in order to construct their own bleak portrait of the nation's beginnings.

The leading figures among these historians were educated in the 1960s and were influenced by the politics of that radical decade. In particular, they accepted the Sixties slogan that everything is political, a notion that went a long way to justify the overt politicization of their work. Although several started out as Marxists, they soon welcomed "interest group" politics, in which women, gays, blacks, and ethnics were all portrayed as oppressed by the prevailing social structure. They replaced the class struggle of Marxism with the "gender, race, and class" liberation movements. After the fall of Communism in 1989, many of them abandoned the cause of the workers to take up that of the Aborigines.

Nonetheless, the underlying impetus of those many well-educated, middle-class Australians who have accepted their story has been not so much their politics as the Enlightenment humanitarianism and evangelical Christianity that has been present since the country's founding. They have inherited a self-critical, morally sensitive culture that readily becomes incensed at breaches of its own ethical rules. This is why they are so willing to believe authors who discover injustices such as those alleged to have been perpetrated against the Aborigines. And this is why those who become the accusers, like Phillip Noyce, often share so much in common with those they accuse, like A. O. Neville.

The obvious problem for such a self-critical moral outlook is its vulnerability to exploitation by those who would mislead and deceive for their own ends. Every now and again such a culture needs a cold bath of factual analysis to bring it to its senses. The time for such a shock to the system in Australia is now well overdue.

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The intimate abstraction of Paul Valéry

by Joseph Epstein

Always demand proof, proof is the elementary courtesy that is anyone's due.
—Valéry, *Monsieur Teste*

The name Paul Valéry carries its own music. For those who know something of what lies behind it, the music deepens, is suggestive, and always richly complex. ("Complex," said Ravel, about his own artistic aims, "never complicated.") To know Valéry only from his melodious but difficult poems—"Le Cimitière marin," "La Jeune Parque," and others—turns out to be to know him scarcely at all. "Poetry," he wrote, "has never been a goal for me—more an instrument, an exercise, and its character derives from this—an artifice—product of will." Poetry provided him with fame, but he found his real intellectual stimulation elsewhere.

Today, Valéry is perhaps best known for his aphoristic remarks, inevitably both brilliant and running against received opinion. Glimpse Valéry's name on the page and one knows something immensely clarifying, possibly life-altering, awaits. "Everything changes but the avant-garde" is one example. "The future, like everything else, is not what it used to be" is another. "History is the science of things which do not repeat themselves" is a third. Without too much effort, one could record three or four hundred Valéryan remarks of equal charm and intellectual provocation.

"Remarks are not literature," Gertrude Stein is supposed to have said to Ernest Hemingway. She was wrong; all depends on the quality of the remarks. But then Stein's stricture would not much have bothered Paul Valéry, who did not think "literature" a purely honorific word. For him literature is a construct, made for entertainment, instruction, excitation, and many other things that are not quite the truth. "There's always a rather sordid side to literature," he wrote in his *Cahiers*, "a lurking deference to one's public. Hence the mental reservations, the ulterior motives basic to every form of charlatanism. Thus every literary production is an 'impure' product."

Although Valéry came to public notice as a young poet, what most interested him was the intellectual operation of the mind; the search for the truth about the way the mind works in cerebration, the mechanics of its functioning, was his main passion. He sought, as he himself late in life put it, "to know the substratum of thought and sensibility on which one has lived." In his *Cahiers*, again, he wrote: "I would like to have classified and clarified my personal forms of thought, and learned to think within them in such a way that each new thought bore the imprint of the whole system generating it and was unmistakably a modification of a well-defined system."

The way Valéry went about this enterprise is not the least astonishing thing about this extraordinary man. After a lustrous beginning as a poet—he met and

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early fell under the influence of that saint of modernism, Stéphane Mallarmé—he stopped writing poems for twenty years, beginning in 1892, when he was twenty-one. While making a living for a wife and children through employment with the French War Ministry and later as private secretary to one of the chief executives for the Paris financial conglomerate Agence Havas, he worked out his ideas, chiefly in private, in 261 notebooks which he wrote during the early morning hours.

Harry Kessler, in his journals, described the middle-age Valéry as resembling nothing so much as a French marquis. French to the highest power though Valéry has always seemed, from the accent *aigu* in his name to the chill clarity that he invariably brought to matters of the highest abstraction—*Ce qui n'est pas clair, n'est pas français*—Valéry's father, a customs officer, was Corsican and his mother came of a northern Italian family. His upbringing was in the French Mediterranean sea-coast city of Cette. He was, like Baudelaire, Henry James, and so many literary men who went on to have unconventional points of view, rather a poor student; most of his serious reading was done away from school. He thought of a naval career, but was washed out by his insufficient math; he went to law school at the Université de Montpellier, where he developed a serious interest in science and mathematics and began writing poems. He met Pierre Louÿs, later author of erotic novels written in a Hellenistic vein, who introduced him to the poetry of Mallarmé.

When Valéry sent Mallarmé a few of his poems, the older man returned them with the comment that "the gift of analogy along with adequate music are already yours and they are all that count." Mallarmé later wrote that one of Valéry's early published poems "charms me." Valéry, meanwhile, after having moved to Paris, became part of the coterie of young poets and *bellelettristes* who met to discuss literary questions at Mallarmé's apartment on Tuesdays.

But on the night of October 4, 1892, in Genoa, Valéry had a vision, an epiphany, one doesn't quite know what to term it, but on that night he decided to forego a standard literary career and instead concentrate his intellectual power on what one can only call pure thought. (He later wrote that "there are few poets who do not go through a fundamental crisis between the ages of twenty and thirty, one in which the destiny of their gift is at stake.") He wanted to know how thought works, what it is based on, its underpinnings, the fundamental mechanisms of the mind itself. This did not mean that Valéry withdrew from society; not at all. He was something of a literary man about town. Nor did he cease publication altogether. He published a few poems. He wrote *Monsieur Teste*, his portrait of a man coolly distanced from common concerns by his detached, scientific standards of truth, and *An Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci,* his study of perhaps the only man in history who did both first-rate science and art.

In a letter to his Harvard teacher J. H. Woods, T. S. Eliot remarks that there are two ways to make a great literary success in London. One is through ubiquity, to publish constantly and everywhere; the other is to publish seldom but, when doing so, always to dazzle by making "these things perfect in their kind." Eliot of course chose this latter path, and so, in a more extreme way, did Paul Valéry.

But, somehow, even with his greatly limited publication, everyone seemed to know about the brilliance of M. Valéry. André Gide was a close friend and a longtime correspondent. Valéry saw Cocteau and Degas and the publisher Gaston Gallimard regularly. His wife, whom he married in 1900 (and with whom he had three children), was the niece of Berthe Morisot and a cousin to Edouard Manet. He knew Ravel and Debussy. André Breton, the main figure in French Surrealism, asked him to be best man at his wedding. "I think I met him [Valéry] for the first time in 1921 or 1922 at a reception by the Princesse de Polignac," Igor Stravinsky recalled in

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Memories and Commentaries. "He was small—about my own height, in fact—quick, quiet (he spoke in very rapid, *sotto voce* mumbles), and gentle. His monocle and *boutonnière* made him seem a dandy, but that impression dissolved as soon as he began to talk. Everything he said was instinct with wit and intelligence."

At the urging of Gide and Gallimard, Valéry returned to writing verse in 1912, and, in attempting to round out a volume of verse for publication, he wrote "La Jeune Parque," a poem of 512 lines that made him a poet of great fame not only in France but throughout Europe. But fame is one thing, fortune, for a poet, quite another. In 1922, after the death of his patron Edouard Lebey, at Agence Havas, he had to scramble for a living. Scrambling meant becoming a literary man-of-all-work: giving talks, doing bits of teaching, writing introductions to other people's books, and the rest of it.

In 1925, Valéry was appointed to fill the seat at the Académie Française of Anatole France. In a dazzlingly ironic reception address upon ascending to membership, he lightly mocked his predecessor and made plain how the changing of the guard of literature had taken place:

> Blessed are those writers who relieve us of the burden of thought and who dextrously weave a luminous veil over the complexity of things. Alas, gentlemen, there are others, whose existence must be deplored, who have have elected to strike out in the opposite direction. They have placed toil of the mind in the way of its pleasures. They offer us riddles. Such creatures are inhuman.

Valéry was of course speaking of himself and his own difficult writing. He also got in a shot about a French society "notable for its inability to find for the intellectually gifted man an appropriate and tolerable place in its gigantic and crude economy." The French seem to understand such mockery and do not let it get in the way; they take it in stride, make no real changes, and move on, business as usual. For Valéry, this meant treating him very much as what used to be called an establishment figure, without his ever having an establishment financial base.

> Please include me [he wrote in connection with being asked to serve on yet another award committee] among those who are weariest of delivering oracles. In the course of this past week, I have spoken a dozen times before thinking. On one occasion, I was asked to name the most beautiful line of verse in our language; on another, I narrated the greatest day in my life; I offered opinions on State reform and on votes for women. I nearly even issued a pronouncement on the comma! The truth is, my good man, that I am past admiring my brain for all the wonderfully various things it had no idea it contained.

Honors continued to come to him until his death in 1945: President of the French P.E.N. Club, an honorary doctorate from Oxford, the post of Administrator of the Centre Universitaire Méditerranéen de Nice, a leading member of the Committee on Intellectual Co-Operation of the League of Nations and later of its Permanent Committee on Arts and Letters, Professor of Poetics at the Collège de France. He was long considered the unofficial poet laureate of France; he referred to himself, in 1932, as "a kind of state poet." His intellectual connections widened, and he knew people as diverse as Joseph Conrad and Rabindranath Tagore, Eliot and D'Annunzio, Pirandello and H. G. Wells. The wonder is how he managed to escape the Nobel Prize.

Valéry wrote no more poems after 1926. His two main periods of poetic production were between 1887–1892 and 1912–1922. "After each period," Roger Shattuck has written, "came twenty years of highly active 'silence' in prose." Such was his intellectual skill that, despite his complaints about all the official hackwork he had to turn out, the truth is that he was incapable of writing anything really dull. The source of this skill was in the daily work on his *Cahiers*. From his

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early twenties until his death, Valéry began each day, arising between 5:00 and 6:00 A.M., aided by coffee and cigarettes, in the act of cerebration, writing out those of his thoughts that he felt were worth preserving. Ultimately, these came to a body of work of 26,000 pages, constituting twenty-nine volumes in a facsimile edition and two volumes in the Pléiade edition of his works.

Much of this material has never been available in English, though an enticing portion was published in the volume titled *Analects* in the splendid fifteen-volume English-language edition of Valéry that Jackson Matthews edited for the Bollingen Foundation. Valéry has always been fortunate in his editors, and perhaps in none more than Matthews, who gave the better part of his adult life to making him available to the small number of readers who do not negotiate the French language with complete ease but who are capable of appreciating both the importance and the pleasure that Valéry's work gives.

Now an English-language version of the full *Cahiers*, under the title *Cahiers/Notebooks*, has begun, scrupulously and skillfully edited by three Valéry scholars, Brian Stimpson, Paul Gifford, and Robert Pickering. The first two volumes are currently available, in a handsome edition in English under the aegis of the international publisher Peter Lang.[1] Valéry seems to have struggled with the question of how to organize all this material in a systematic way; and felt unsure at times whether it ought even to be published at all. Five volumes are planned for this English edition, the last three more scientific and philosophical (another word that was no honorific in Valéry's vocabulary) than these first two, which are more literary and, in a distant sense of the word, personal. The project is a genuine contribution to scholarship and even more to the history of thought in the twentieth century.

1 *Cahiers/Notebooks*, by Paul Valéry, edited by Brian Stimpson *et al.*; Peter Lang, Volume I, 654 pages, $92.95, Volume II, 594 pages, $92.95.

Rilke once remarked that what drew him to Paul Valéry's writing was the "finality" and "composure" of its language. His lucidity on complex subjects is what excites; his ability to capture the essence of the questions, issues, and problems that the rest of us find puzzling if not impenetrable is what amazes—and that he was able to do so with an almost assembly-line regularity is itself astonishing.

What gives Valéry's prose its gravity, lucidity, and chasteness is what he excludes from it. He disliked irony, except in conversation, and felt that it chiefly gave a writer an air of superiority, adding that "every ironist has in mind a pretentious reader, mirror of himself." He also had a distaste for eloquence, "because eloquence has the form of a mixture, adapted to a crowd. It has not the form of thought." He cared more for precision than profundity, and precision was only accessible through the utmost clarity: "the kind that does not come from the use of words like 'death,' 'God,' 'life,' or 'love'—but dispenses with such trombones." No trombones, no trumpets, no brass section in Valéry's prose; a solo cello, deep strings played under perfect control and superior acoustical conditions, is all we ever hear.

Add to this his intellectual contempt for politics, which he felt took on life *en masse*, or in its coarsest possible form. "I consider politics, political action, all forms of politics, as inferior values and inferior activities of the mind," he wrote. Politics is the realm of the expedient, the rough guess: "crude, vain, or desperate solutions are indispensable to mankind just as they are to individuals, *because they do not know*." In politics, he wrote, "by a trick of inverted lights, friends see each other as enemies, fools look impressive to the intelligent, who in turn see themselves as very tiny indeed." Politics calls, inevitably, for the polemic, which carries its own peril: "that of losing the power of thinking otherwise than polemically, as if one were facing an audience and in the presence of the enemy." Valéry could think of nothing in the realm

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of thought "madder" or more vulgar "than wanting to be right," which is of course what politics is chiefly about.

He had no greater regard for history. "The *true character* of history," he wrote, "is to play a part in history itself." He thought of it as sheer story-telling, with the added danger of "invitation to plagiarism," which entails repeating earlier historians' stories, always "a fatal invitation." He wrote: "*History teaches us . . . History will judge . . .* That's a myth in two nonsenses." He especially disliked the grand dramatizers of history—Michelet is a notable example—and he believed that "history finally leads to politics, just as Bacchus used to lead to Venus."

Although his own quest was sometimes described as philosophical, philosophy, too, was, for Valéry, yet another shaky enterprise; "hearsay," he called it, and pronounced metaphysics "astrology with words." Religion, he felt, "provides people with words, acts, gestures, and 'thoughts' covering the predicaments in which they are at a loss what to say, to do, or to imagine." A man tends "to deny what he is unable to affirm (express)," and so religion, inadequate as a mode of thought, at least provided a shield against our deep ignorance about the basic questions of existence. He was himself not averse to using the world "soul," though he said he was interested in "collecting *minds* only." Valéry does not say much about his own views on religion, but he was prescient enough, more than half a century ago, to write: "The religious debate is no longer between different religions; but between those who believe that *belief* has some sort of value and those who don't."

Anyone who reads through these *Notebooks* and through Valéry's work generally will notice how seldom he quotes, or even mentions other writers. In an essay called "French Thought and Art," he descants for thirteen pages with the mention of only a single name, that of Montesquieu, and this brought in only tangentially. This is another sign of the purity of his lucubrations. "Names," he wrote, "are only made to send us back to things, yet they too often save us the journey."

As by now will be evident, Valéry sought a position of maximum detachment for his own efforts to understand the functioning of the mind. "No one has stood back from everything and everyone more than I have." he wrote. "I'd like to turn them all into a spectacle—and rid myself of everything but my own way of looking." His *Notebooks* are neither journals nor a diary, nor even, in the sense in which most writers, Henry James perhaps primary among them, use notebooks to record impressions and ideas later to be developed in one's novels, plays, or poems. "Here is no merely private record of personal hopes, fears, and aspirations, no chronicle of deeds and days, still less is it (as Journals from Rousseau to Gide had commonly been) the public confession of, or apology for, an intimate self," as Paul Gifford writes. Instead the *Notebooks* constitute, as Gifford accurately calls it, "a laboratory of thought." Valéry uses them to work through his intellectual dissatisfaction with modes of thinking that we have all inherited, and in the attempt to break through them he tries, in these many pages, to understand why, in their faultiness, they appeal to us.

Cool and impersonal though Valéry's *Notebooks* at first might appear, in the end it is difficult to imagine anything more personal than this work. T. S. Eliot famously said that poetry "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." But the more impersonal serious writing attempts to become, the more personal it seems. This may be owing to the mysteries of style, which is a way of looking at the world, and no one had a more original way of looking at the world than Valéry, which of course is what gave him his distinctive style. His is a style of thought, rather than of manner, thought marked by skepticism, penetration, and a taste and talent for useful paradox. The deeper, the more abstract his thought, the more intimate he could be.

Characteristically, Valéry disapproves of

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the words "deep" or "depth" to describe thinking. He held that "only what is on the surface can have meaning," by which he can only have meant that, if one has the intelligence to read the surface accurately, one will easily enough discover what lies beneath it. "Being 'deep,' getting to the bottom of things," he writes, "is nothing. Anybody can dive; some, however, are caught in the water weeds of their abyss and die there, unable to break free." In his *Notebooks*, sometimes one is required to put on the scuba-diving equipment. Behind his quest for the way the mind works was the deeper search for human potential—that is, only when we know how our mental operations work will we know of what we are capable.

"By scrutinizing the inner structures and workings of the self," Brian Stimpson writes in the introduction to the English edition of the *Notebooks*, "and by employing the most advanced tools of scientific analysis, [Valéry] might, so he hoped, at once free himself from the tyranny of ideas and emotions and formulate a unitary mathematically expressed model of mental functioning, a rigorous, comprehensive understanding of the mind and its products." Valéry didn't, no one will be shocked to learn, achieve this, or even come anywhere near close. "What Valéry has done, had to be attempted," said Henri Bergson, his very grammar acknowledging the element of noble defeat. Valéry himself came to have a more modest view of his own enterprise: "Personally," he wrote, "I regard thought as a sort of 'nexus of possibilities' which, operating between these two states [a question and an answer], and by means of certain disciplines, can render useful services as a catalytic." Reading through Valéry's works, I have come to regard him as both catalytic and as prophylactic, simultaneously evoking thought and guarding against shoddy thinking and unearned intellectual confidence.

In a famous formulation, Valéry wrote that "The mind is a moment in the response of the body to the world." One might think that the triad of mind, body, and environment and their effect on one another would be easily enough plotted and traced, but they are not. And to raise the question of mind, of what is behind our thinking and how it really works, is, as Valéry knew, "to call everything into question." In a brief essay called "I Would Sometimes Say to Mallarmé," he wrote: "Why not admit that man is the source and origin of enigmas, where there is no object, or being, or moment that is not impenetrable; when our existence, our movements, our sensations absolutely cannot be explained; and when everything we see becomes indecipherable from the moment our minds come to rest on it." Valéry did admit it; and in his *Notebooks* he attempted to investigate why this was so.

Of the various divisions among thinkers, I have always been partial to that between thinkers whose strength is in their ideas (Marx, Freud, to a much lesser power Orwell) and thinkers whose strength is in the texture and subtlety, the sensibility, of their minds (Montaigne, Henry James, Santayana). The former win their way in the world, then die out; the latter, always less dramatic in their presentation, are wiser and their work tends to last longer. Valéry is among the sensibility thinkers. "I don't construct a 'System,'" he reports in his *Notebooks*. "My system—is me," And later he writes: "Just think!—The stock of ideas on which the majority of 'cultured' people live is the legacy of a specific number of individuals, all of whom were moved and inspired by philosophic and literary vanity, and by the ambition to govern other minds and seek their approval and their praise." This may seem very radical, but Valéry would have viewed it as traditional, for, as he wrote, "in all great undertakings, tradition, in the true sense of the word, does not consist of doing again what others have done before, but in recapturing the spirit that went into what they did—and would have done differently in a different age."

If one doesn't read Valéry in the hope of

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finding yet another false key to unlocking the room containing all the world's mysteries, one does read him, or at least I read him, to remind me what genuine thought looks like. I also read him because, as he writes, "From 1892 onwards I've felt and maintained a hatred and scorn for Vague Things, and have waged relentless war on them my whole life long. They are the things which cannot stand up to sustained attention, without being reduced to having no existence beyond the name which one thinks denotes them; things which either evaporate the more you think about them, or change into objects of thought for which quite different names are appropriate." If a few examples of such "things" are wanted, try, just for size, the Class Struggle or the Oedipus Complex. "I don't like those minds," Valéry wrote, "even vast and powerful ones, whose thoughts are incapable of being taken to a certain level of precision." Think of Ralph Waldo Emerson; now reverse him and you have Paul Valéry.

"My life's ambition," Valéry wrote, "has only ever been to stir a little interest in minds that are not easily satisfied." One hopes, of course, that one possesses such a mind. Another requisite for an appreciation of Valéry is a mind excited by style. Style, my guess is, functioned for him as a filter through which nonsense was strained. Karl Kraus once described a journalist as "someone who, given time, writes worse." So with Valéry: when he wrote longer he often wrote worse. His lordly lucidity is most impressive when most concise "A machine is matter that has been trained," he wrote. "A lyrical poem is the unfolding of an exclamation," he wrote. "Optimists write badly," he wrote.

Valéry's was the art of precise formulation. His powers of formulation made him one of the great naturally aphoristic writers of the last century. Unlike other French aphorists, *les moralistes*, his aphorisms touch on serious and delicate matters but almost never on moral questions. "My son," he confided to his *Notebooks*, "I'll bring you up very badly for I'm incapable of giving you precepts that I don't understand." Elsewhere he added: "I know the value of *good* and *evil*. I feel very pleased when I do *good* because I recognize evil so strongly—and because I recognize even more strongly the irrelevance of these notions." By "irrelevance," my suspicion is, he meant his inability to do much about good or evil in the world. Valéry claimed to despise proselytizing, and there is no reason to disbelieve him.

His own mind operated above the level of ideas. You will find few words in Valéry that end in i-s-m; and those that he does use he brings in only to mock. Symbolism is an example, for "Symbolist" was the label attached to the poets clustered around Mallarmé when he, Valéry, was young. "It is impossible to think *seriously* with such words as Classicism, Romanticism, Humanism, Realism, and the other -isms. You can't get drunk or quench your thirst with the labels on bottles."

Although Valéry tended to be less than impressed with the novel—"reading stories and novels helps to kill second- or third-class time"—his was in many ways the view of a superior novelist. In an essay called "Descartes," he wrote: "My own view is that we cannot really circumscribe a man's life, imprison him in his ideas and his actions, reduce him to what he appeared to be and, so to speak, lay siege to him in his works. We are much more (and sometimes much less) than we have done."

Valéry's formulations, brilliant in themselves, often provide the added pleasure of provoking useful disagreement. "Our most important thoughts are those which contradict our feelings," he wrote. True enough though that seems, it seems even truer the other way round: Our most important feelings are those which contradict our thoughts. "A writer is 'profound,'" Valéry claimed, "when what he says, *once translated from language into unambiguous thought*, compels us to think it over for a perceptible, and rewarding, period of time." Valéry's own writing passes that test, again and again.

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The only standard of truth that Valéry was able to invoke was that of science, especially mathematics. The man who when young was unable to set out on a naval career for want of mathematical ability later developed a passionate fascination for the beauty of mathematics and an intense interest in neuroscience. His personal library provides evidence that, as he grew older, he read more science than literature. Among his friends were Poincaré and Niels Bohr; Einstein was someone he met on a number of occasions. His heroes were men, beginning with Leonardo da Vinci, in whom thought and action were one, from Napoleon to Lord Kelvin. Although he was no more than a reasonably well-informed dilettante in scientific matters, scientists came to have a high opinion, as his niece Judith Robinson-Valéry has put it, of his "precise and strategic grasp of what is at stake in their own research." In early positing the inextricability of the triad of Mind, Body, and World in influencing human thought and conduct, Valéry can even be said to have been anticipated much work in modern neurology that was still to come.

The task Valéry set himself was that of re-cognition—to "re-cognate, to rethink things afresh," and to work through them shorn of the conventional wisdom supplied by politics, history, and rhetoric. "'Opinions,' 'convictions,' and 'beliefs' are to me like weeds—confusions," he wrote. He claimed that he wrote "to test, to clarify, to extend, not to duplicate what has been done." He sought his own definitions, more precise than any to be found in dictionaries. "I notice in passing," he wrote to his friend André Gide, "that it is the vague idea that is most generally understood—and that a man is taken to be obscure as soon as he is precise." He also knew that in human beings "cognition reigns but does not rule."

Not everyone felt that Valéry's great project was worthwhile. Some even felt it an evasion. Stravinsky thought he was "altogether too fascinated by the processes of creation" and too worshipful of the power of intellect, and regretted that he failed to spend more time at his poetry than in solitary cerebration. Invited to write about Valéry by Hubert Benoit, St. John Perse felt that Valéry had been mistaken not to set his thoughts in order "with a view to make a definite statement of them," and instead "dissipated his gifts, for lack of real control and of ability to follow through, and also for lack of a really demanding vitality."

Valéry himself was far from thinking his enterprise a grand success. He was in the uncomfortable position of being everywhere revered yet knowing his own shortcomings. "I'm afraid," he wrote in the *Notebooks*, "I might be beginning to find a feeling of vanity in me—thinking I'm something—which until now was quite foreign to me." He goes on to say that this feeling is pleasant to the taste, "like certain kinds of poison," but that he knows he hasn't obtained "what I would have desired from the world." What he desired can only have been a lucid presentation of the function of the mind, a magnum opus, *The Art of Thinking,* he once called it, saying it was a book "which has never really been written; nor was anyone ever to write it."

Instead he left behind these 261 notebooks, filled with his thoughts on everything from the composition of poetry to the relation among body parts to recognition of the beautiful to the connection between dreams and intellectual discovery ("sleep and ye shall find") to negative hallucinations (not seeing things that are there), and a catalogue of other items, at whose vastness I have only been able to hint at here. In the end, though, he understood that "the essential object of the mind is the mind. What it pursues in its analyses and its construction of worlds, what it tracks down in heaven and on earth, can only be itself."

Valéry was too wise not to know that, when his life was over, his work was incomplete. He had set out to do for intellection what Dante had done for the spirit and Balzac for men and women in society—to write, in fact, a Comedy of the Mind. People who put themselves to a reading of

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his *Notebooks* will recognize them as an unfinished masterpiece, but he would have thought otherwise and eschewed the word "masterpiece," for in an entry in those *Notebooks* he remarks that what other people judge a successful work may seem a defeat for the author; and he also believed that, though what he discovered was not without its importance, people were unlikely to be able to decipher it from his notes.

"Everything I've accomplished all my life since I was twenty, consists of nothing other than a kind of *perpetual preparation*, *without purpose*, without end . . . without practical or external goal," he wrote. He also claimed that everything done outside his *Notebooks* was "my *artificial* work—the result of obligations and external impulses. And this must be understood if anyone wants to understand anything about me—there's nothing essential—or necessary—in any of it." But his every morning's work—"between lamp and dawn," as he once described it—sharpened his mind, so that even the least dutiful official talk he gave, introduction he wrote, journalistic query he responded to shimmered with intelligence and was free of falsity.

Some minds, Valéry wrote, "have the merit of seeing clearly what all others see confusedly. Some have the merit of glimpsing confusedly what no one sees as yet. A combination of these gifts is exceptional." He was himself in possession of this combination, but, then, he was an exceptional man. Reading him gives you the sense of fog lifting. His writing makes you feel, as he himself wished to feel, that you see things no one but you (and he) has seen. One of the keenest pleasures of reading derives from being in the close company of someone more thoughtful than you but whose thoughts, owing to the courtesy of clarity, are handsomely accessible to you. Paul Valéry provides this pleasure more delectably than any writer I know.

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Peter Taylor today

by Richard Tillinghast

The territory Peter Taylor staked out for himself may be summed up easily and neatly enough. His characters are primarily upper-middle-class and upper-class people from the upper, as opposed to the "deep," south, living in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Just as William Faulkner made the state of Mississippi his theater of conflict and revelation, Peter Taylor focused on Tennessee, with its three distinct regions: west, middle, and east. Taylor had roots in all three provinces and in his writings the state becomes a *paysage moralisé*.

Born in 1917 in the small West Tennessee town of Trenton—fictionalized as Thornton—he spent his childhood there and in Nashville, the urban center of Middle Tennessee, which was the first part of the state to be settled. He moved with his family first to St. Louis, and then to Memphis when he was fifteen years old. West Tennessee, centered around Memphis, had from the older, more strait-laced Nashvillean point of view, its own "peculiar institutions . . . the institutions, that is to say, which one associates with the cotton and river culture of the Deep South," as the narrator of his Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *A Summons to Memphis* explains. In the same book a Nashville society lady puts it this way: "Nashville . . . is a city of schools and churches, whereas Memphis is—well, Memphis is something else again. Memphis is a place of steamboats and cotton gins, of card playing and hotel society."

Let me qualify my position as critic. I grew up in Memphis, though my parents were not society people as Peter's family were. He and I became friends after we were both living away from Memphis, but we knew a lot of the same people there and elsewhere in Tennessee. In several cases these were people whose lives his fictional stories were based on. This knowledge is a little more important than it might be in relation to other writers, because in Taylor's writing there is a very thin line between real people and fictional characters.

I first met him in 1960 in Monteagle, Tennessee, which he described in a letter to a college friend, Robie Macauley, as "a little, old fashioned mountain resort where the same fine old families have been going for seventy-five years." Later he would fictionalize the resort as Owl Mountain and make it the setting for several of his stories. On the verandah of the novelist Andrew Lytle's log house I heard him tell an anecdote which I knew as a short story in one of his collections. It surprised me that he treated the story as something from life rather than from his fiction. Thinking about it later, I was not sure exactly how he thought about the story: whether through modesty he did not claim it as his property as a fiction writer, or whether on some level he felt it had a life of his own and did not really belong to him. Something of his respect for the story's independent existence beyond the fiction

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writer's control can be seen in his dedication to his *Collected Stories*:

> For my Mother
> Katherine Taylor Taylor
> who was the best teller of tales I know
> and from whose lips I first heard many
> of the stories in this book.

The independence of the story, and the teller as a determining factor: both of these are crucial in Taylor's fiction. On the one hand, he may be viewed as the chronicler of the life and history of a region in which his family played a key political role. On the other, he is as pure a psychological artist as Flaubert or Henry James. The paradox is that on the one hand he is the supreme chronicler of a place, a time, a social milieu; on the other hand, any place on earth would have served him as well. There is much to learn and understand about Peter Taylor—the subtleties of his fiction, the complexities of his life story, and how the two are intertwined. Hubert H. McAlexander has recently published *Peter Taylor: A Writer's Life* (Louisiana State University Press, 2001), which admirably puts together most of the pieces of the puzzle. An out-of-print collection of short stories, *In the Miro District*, has also recently been republished (Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

Peter Taylor's father was a landowner and lawyer from Trenton. His mother was the daughter of one of Tennessee's favorite sons, Robert Love "Our Bob" Taylor (1850–1912), who served the state both as Governor and as U.S. Senator. Senator Taylor was one of the state's genuine heroes in the period between the Civil War and WWI, a time when it badly needed both heroes and reunification. East Tennessee, where Robert Taylor's roots were, had been largely pro-Union, while the state as a whole had seceded as part of the Confederacy, though it was occupied by Union troops during much of the war. East Tennessee more closely fits the state's "hillbilly" caricature than do the two other parts of the state. Robert Love Taylor was renowned as a great orator, known for his set pieces such as "The Fiddle and the Bow" and "Yankee Doodle and Dixie." This was the age of the orator in America, and "Our Bob" had the gift. He even traveled the lyceum circuit as a sideline to his legal practice after serving two terms as governor. A letter to his brother Alf shows the zest he brought to the platform:

> January 2, 1892
>
> Dear Alf—I have succeeded thus far in my tour. Last night at Morristown I cut my eagle loose. It was the first time I have been absolutely free from my notes. I caught the crowd in fine style. Compliments were free and extravagant. . . . At Bristol I swept the harp strings and captured my audience. . . .

Senator Taylor, something of a link to the state's frontier past, was also a renowned fiddler, and his instrument is on display to this day at the Museum of Appalachia, near Knoxville. My maternal grandfather, who was active in West Tennessee politics in the early years of the last century, owned a horse called Our Bob. The letter from which I have quoted an excerpt above is taken from a book I have from my mother's library, *The Life and Career of Robert Love Taylor (Our Bob)*, published in 1913, which comes as close to hagiography as you can get in American politics, with photos of the famous funeral procession from Washington to Tennessee that formed the background for his grandson's last novel, *In the Tennessee Country*. The format of this essay does not allow me to examine that novel, but I hope readers' interests will be sufficiently aroused for them to take it up on their own. It explores territory quite different in nature from areas I address in this essay, in that it tells the story of the outsider, an exile from the settled existence that forms the material for most of Taylor's fiction.

An awareness of the state's history and

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geography are never far from the surface of his work. This is how Phillip Carver's mother in *A Summons to Memphis* describes the family's move from Nashville to Memphis:

> With her ironic cast of mind and her sense and knowledge of local history she kept comparing our removal to the various events of early Tennessee history. We were like the Donelson party on the voyage down the Tennessee River, making their way through the flocks of swans at Moccasin Bend. We were like the Watauga men setting out for the Great Powwow on the Long Island of the Holston. Or what she liked best of all, we were like the Cherokees being driven from their ancestral lands on the notorious Trail of Tears.

Peter Taylor grew up with an awareness of historical background, a grounding in politics and oratory, a sense of inheriting as a birthright the important events of his state. The body of lore I have briefly sketched—drawn largely from McAlexander's biography—formed the heroic past for him. The unheroic, problematic, and infinitely fascinating present revolved around Taylor's father and the difficulties of being his son. Hillsman Taylor, having been raised to a position of prominence as president of the multimillion-dollar Missouri State Life Insurance Company by Rogers Caldwell, a Vanderbilt classmate who brought him into his business, moved his family from Nashville to St. Louis to run the company. In a huge financial scandal in which, however, his own integrity was not in question, he was betrayed by his business partner and essentially ruined. It was against this background that in 1932, when his youngest son Pete was fifteen, his father moved the family to Memphis to start life over again.

In Memphis, energized by the heroic past and agitated by the tumultuous present, Peter Taylor, the writer, came into being. Memphis became the theater for his struggles with a patriarchal father who, hardened by his experience of personal and professional betrayal, sought to force his son to follow him into the legal profession. Hillsman Taylor could hardly have foreseen how the story of his betrayal and its damaging effects on his family, who had to bear the shocks of that blow internally, would play itself out imaginatively in the fiction of a son whose literary path had no place in his family's world of landowners, lawyers, politicians and men of business. Let me stress the word "imaginatively" in the preceding sentence. Biographical criticism is as tricky as it is appealing. One needs to be aware that the alteration of even one detail may change the complexion of a real-life story utterly.

Still, the dynastic, historical concerns that led Taylor to write a masterpiece like *In the Tennessee Country* were accompanied by the theme of struggle between father and son which can be seen in *A Summons to Memphis*, as well as in several notable short stories such as "Dean of Men," "Heads of Houses," "The Gift of the Prodigal," and others.

Hillsman Taylor saw himself, much to his dismay, as the model for the overbearingly patriarchal fathers in some of his son's early stories. Hubert McAlexander reports that on a visit to his son and daughter-in-law, the poet Eleanor Ross Taylor, while they were living in North Carolina in 1949, "When he stepped off the plane at Durham, his first words were 'If you'd been home when that last story came out, I'd have knocked you down.'" McAlexander makes a convincing argument that "Though Peter Taylor never acknowledged the fact, Hillsman's behavior caused him to abandon treating in his fiction the central emotional contours of their relationship until after his father's death fifteen years later." The urgency of his emotions toward his father did not go stale during their years of being bottled up inside, and they poured out in powerful stories such as "Dean of Men" and, triumphantly, in *A Summons to Memphis*. In 1959 Taylor based the title of his collection *Happy Families Are All Alike* on the first sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*—

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less widely quoted back then, I might add, than it is today—"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Alongside the grand sweep of his historical vision and his intense awareness of intergenerational friction, the third string to Peter Taylor's bow was a subversive awareness of the dynamics of what these days is called privilege. Through his father's fall and recovery, he had caught a glimpse of what it would be like to lose one's position in the elite society of a city like Memphis, or Nashville or St. Louis. Peter Taylor was one of the most social men I have ever known. Gregarious even to a fault, a "party boy" when he was young and a legendary host in his middle years, a delight to be with, he lived inside society like a fish in water, enjoying every minute of the parties and the gossip. And yet at the same time he was a spy, like Agrippina in the house of Nero.

In "The Old Forest," one of his most celebrated stories, and the title story in a 1985 collection, Taylor uses first-person narration, which this great technician perfected as an instrument of irony and a way to reveal self-deception and partial knowledge. The story is a study of power in a medium-sized American city in the late 1930s, in which the central character, Nat Ramsey, son of a prominent Memphis family, learns several lessons about his place in the scheme of things, becoming considerably less arrogant in the process. "I was already formally engaged, as we used to say, to the girl I was going to marry," the story begins. "But still I sometimes went out on the town with girls of a different sort." These girls belong to a category "we facetiously and somewhat arrogantly referred to as the Memphis demimonde. (That was merely to say with a girl who was not in the Memphis debutante set.) I am not even sure how many of us knew what the word 'demimonde' meant or implied." These were working girls from the small towns around Memphis, but unlike the "innocent, untutored types" at the Country Club, they "read books, they looked at pictures, and they were apt to attend any concert or play that came to Memphis. When the old San Carlo Opera Company turned up in town, you could count on certain girls of the demimonde being present in their block of seats, and often with a score of the opera in hand."

Driving through Overton Park in Memphis with one of these "demimondaines," a girl named Lee Ann Deehart, Nat has a minor collision with another vehicle. No one is seriously hurt, but immediately afterwards, Lee Ann gets quickly out of the car and disappears into "a densely wooded area which is actually the last surviving bit of the primeval forest that once grew right up to the bluffs above the Mississippi River. Here are giant oak and yellow poplar trees older than the memory of the earliest white settler. Some of them surely may have been mature trees when Hernando de Soto passed this way, and were very old trees indeed when General Jackson, General Winchester, and Judge John Overton purchased this land and laid out the city of Memphis." By such means Peter Taylor turns the relatively trivial automobile accident into a quasi-mythical surround informed by the deep history of the region.

I have mentioned Henry James in relation to Taylor's work, but while he emulated the acuity of James's psychological analysis, he did not go in for the kind of fiction associated with modernists like James and Joyce, in constructing plots where "nothing happens." He might be seen as having more in common with a popular Victorian like Trollope, a full set of whose novels he inherited when his sister died. "I don't know how I'd live without Trollope," he told Robert Lowell, his Kenyon roommate and lifelong friend.

On one level, the story is fueled by suspense. The big question underlying the events in "The Old Forest" is: why does Lee Ann Deehart run away? Until she turns up safe, Nat Ramsey cannot be married to his debutante fiancée, Caroline Braxley. The automobile accident turns out to be a key

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event in everyone's lives, because it brings Lee Ann to face up to aspects of her own family history she has chosen not to acknowledge previously; more centrally it puts Caroline in a position where she needs to assert herself as a woman of strength, to take matters into her own hands so as to save her upcoming marriage to Nat. Additionally, it brings this sheltered debutante to acknowledge the strength of the "demimondaine" girls who have habitually been treated as objects of condescension by members of her class. This comes out in an exchange between the engaged couple at the end of the story:

> "Don't you see, it was a question of how very much I had to lose and how little power I had to save myself. Because *I* had not set myself free the way those other girls have. One makes that choice at a much earlier age than this, I'm afraid. And so I knew already, Nat, and I know now what the only kind of power I can ever have must be." She hesitated then. She was capable of phrasing what she said much more precisely. But it would have been indelicate, somehow, for her to have done so. And so I said it for her in my crude way: "You mean the power of a woman in a man's world."

Indirectly, her growth into her own full strength, even in the limited context of the era and the society within which they live, will turn out to give Nat the support he needs, later in life, to leave his safe position in his father's cotton business, return to the university, and pursue an academic career: "the firmness with which she supported my decision, and the look in her eyes whenever I spoke of feeling I must make the change, seemed to say to me that she would dedicate her pride of power to the power of freedom I sought."

With its explorations of women's roles in a male-dominated society, "The Old Forest" represents in some ways a throwback to his earlier stories, like those in the 1954 collection, *The Widows of Thornton*, such as "A Wife of Nashville" and "Two Ladies in Retirement." The latter is a chillingly brutal account of the means by which a "country cousin" carves out for herself a secure place within the family of her rich St. Louis relations. It would be a mistake to suggest, though, that Peter Taylor's career could be divided into a period when he focused on female characters and a period when he focused on male characters; but still, around the age of forty, he did turn his attention more to the male side of the universe, with a long story called "At the Drugstore," which dramatizes a moment of existential doubt in the life of a man in early middle age who is visiting his parents in his old home town.

"Dean of Men," which he placed first in the 1969 *Collected Stories of Peter Taylor*, introduces an extremely unappealing narrator plucked right out of the intergenerational disputes of the sixties: "I am not unsympathetic, Jack," the story begins, "to your views on the war. I am not unsympathetic to your views on the state of the world in general. From the way you wear your hair and from the way you dress I do find it difficult to decide whether you or that young girl you say you are about to marry is going to play the male role in your marriage—or the female role. But even that I don't find offensive . . ." It is clear who the offensive one is here.

The story is replete with ironies. This *soi-disant* "not unsympathetic" father tells the story of how his own father became a disappointed man whose life shrank to the microcosm of his own household as a result of his being betrayed by his best friend and business partner—essentially Peter Taylor's father's story. "He was an affectionate father, and I rarely saw him in what I would call depressed spirits. Yet how often one had the feeling that he was lonely and bored." This man's story is told against the background, in turn, of the story of his own father—the narrator's grandfather, a United States senator who had also been betrayed and as a result "withdrew almost entirely from all male company, seeing men only as

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his rather limited law practice required him to do. He lived out his life in a household of women and children. . . . He never allowed himself to be addressed as senator and forbade all political talk in his presence. The members of his household were destined to retain in their minds and to hand down to future generations their picture of him not as a statesman of high principle or even as a silver-tongued orator but as the coarse-tongued old tyrant of their little world."

The narrator, the Dean of Men, has his own story of betrayal and unsatisfactory compensation for that betrayal. This is a masterly family chronicle: four generations of men from the same family, descending in order from United States senator to corporation lawyer to college administrator to youthful Vietnam-era protestor (though the last of the four men is present only as the presumably tacit listener). Each of the three older men finds himself betrayed in similar fashion; in each case their ways of coping with the betrayal are inadequate, injuring themselves and those around them.

A Summons to Memphis is Peter Taylor's full-length treatment of the task every man inherits: the attempt to understand, and if possible, to honor his father. Though he published a short novel, *A Woman of Means*, in 1950, he was known throughout his career as a short story writer whose work drew comparisons with the best. Critics have often invoked Chekhov when discussing his work. Before writing his first extended work of fiction, it seems fitting, however, that he should have marshaled his powers until he was ready to tackle the issue in his life that was both most painful to him and closest to his own sense of who he was.

The first sentence of the book announces its subject as a domestic drama, in more or less Freudian terms: "The courtship and remarriage of an old widower is always made more difficult when middle-aged children are involved—especially when there are unmarried daughters." I have already laid out the geographical and cultural dynamics against which the drama is enacted, as well as the family's "removal" from civilized Nashville to flamboyant Memphis when the children of the family have just reached difficult and crucial ages in their lives. (The word "removal" is typical of the freighted, old-fashioned vocabulary that Taylor employs at key moments, adding depth and dignity to his prose.) *A Summons to Memphis* takes on the damage incurred and the resentment carried by the children of the family patriarch, who in this novel is named George Carver.

The paradox of the family story is that in the act of saving his own and his family's fortunes he may have ruined the lives of his wife and children. His son Phillip's aggrieved view is that "All of Father's earlier aspirations and ambitions had required him to consider only the risk that might be entailed for himself, but when he uprooted his family in Nashville and took us to Memphis he was morally bound to consider the risks there were for the psyches of five other people, not merely a dependent young wife and a bundle of small children but a wife who was now past forty and four young people who were either adolescents or young adults . . ." His wife's and daughters' tragedy was that they became too thoroughly Memphian—i.e. too social and frivolous, losing their Nashville values, adapting all too well to their new milieu. Additionally, his daughters have come increasingly to meddle in the lives of their siblings and later their father. Both of his sons have escaped—one by joining the air force during the War and getting killed at an early age, one by deracinating himself completely, living a rather aimless life in the anonymity of New York City as a publisher and rare books dealer.

The daughters, who have remained unmarried and essentially unfulfilled for a variety of reasons, predictably take their complex revenge on the old man. "He did not dream, I told myself, that simultaneous with their love and admiration which they so often expressed for Father they were silently experiencing emotions of the very opposite kind." What to George Carver is

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an attempt to assert himself, to extend his own vitality, is to them mere foolishness. One of the daughters remarks, chillingly: "Anyway, one can only try to keep one's sense of humor and see the funny side of his adventures. After all, he is still our father. We belong to him, and he belongs to us." While the surviving son Phillip lives a sterile life of disengagement, his aging sisters and his aged father carry out their protracted struggle of wills in the family home in Memphis.

A Summons to Memphis does much more, however, than to prove that "Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In this book Peter Taylor creates one of the most rounded and self-contradictory heroes in modern fiction. One doesn't need to know anything about Taylor's real father to sense that with George Carver, we are entering the realm of myth. At a very advanced age, he turns up to meet his son at the airport in Memphis on the day he plans to marry a widow lady of his acquaintance. "He appeared as he had appeared to me when I was a very small boy in Nashville, a person of great power and stature. I saw a flash image of him on horseback, dressed as master of hounds and holding the horn to his lips. I saw the man of iron will and courage and perfect skill and limitless intelligence that I had believed in as a small boy almost without knowing what it was I believed."

At the same time his grown son has to come to terms with a certain impersonality and perhaps ruthlessness in his father's attitude towards him—a feeling that he is glad to see him primarily because his son can be of use to him: "And now Father seized my right hand between his own gray-kid-gloved hands . . . he exerted such pressure on my hand that I had perforce to look up at him and gaze nowhere but into his radiant blue eyes. The look in his eyes, the very smile on his thin lips told me better than any words could have done how overjoyed he was that I was there to support him. . . . But he had never before in his life given me such a greeting."

The book describes in surprisingly glowing terms the friendship between George Carver and Lewis Shackleford, the business partner who betrays him, and its culmination occurs in the reconciliation between the two when they are both very old. For his surviving children it is a bitter pill to swallow that his friendship with Mr. Shackleford turns out to have been the consuming passion of his life—that after decades of forbidding the man's name to be spoken in his household, after spoiling his wife's and children's chances in life because of the man's betrayal of him, he should not only end up forgiving Shackleford, but renewing their old friendship.

In *A Summons to Memphis*, the heroic vision, which was Peter Taylor's inheritance from Tennessee history and family legend, subsumes and triumphs over both the critique of privilege and the close study of family conflict that I have described as his other two main preoccupations. When one surveys the long curve of his career as a maker of fictions, one sees that his ultimate gift to his readers is a kind of bemused serenity, a sublime but far from sentimental transcendence over human suffering and tragedy.

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New poems
by Andrew Frisardi & Justine Cook

Song

The alluringest sleep by far is flesh—
Mandrake on an ordinary day.
The women on the street are a walking wish,
And the children come out to play.

The warriors in Homer disdained Paris
Because he liked love a little too much.
Within a tangle of sheets and hair, his
Killer's skill had lost its touch.

I, a man of a softer, decadent age,
Always had sympathy for Paris's plight,
Preferring a musky oblivion to rage,
A naked caress to a fight.

—Andrew Frisardi

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May Day black locust

The longer I look
At the dry brown pods
And white, bell-shaped,
Honey-fragrant blossoms
Among which the bees
Are plunging their heads,
The more the bees seem
The moving members
Of the tree's flourish,
As the stream nearby
Is its running commentary,
And I, the observer,
Am taking notes on myself.

—*Andrew Frisardi*

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Venice

Why must I see as if the course were charted
the ways that we unravel? Once, you
were the faith I built on, the solid place
I traveled to, the city whose liquid streets I
endlessly investigated—happy architecture, pillars,
cornices, bridges—the gondola of my imagination poling
around bends, startled at the journey ever inward and
most comforting of all, where I could remain forever.
When did it happen, tell me, that this easy adventure
became a knotty maze, anxious alleys to be dead-ended in?
When did the trap of not emerging into a sunlit square
become the suffocation of a psyche—a silent badge
that I wear now, knowing that in a few short years I will step
away exhausted? My time grows nearer when I will try
for the open sea—alone I can blame no one
when the final storm overreaches and downs my craft.

—*Justine Cook*

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London journal

A tale of two Tonies

by John Gross

Social life in London has become a dangerous business. You are at an apparently relaxed dinner party, and someone suddenly launches into an anti-American diatribe—as often as not, to general applause. You are having a friendly conversation, when out of the blue there is a crack about the utter impossibility of Dubya or the evil ways of the Washington junta—and the assumption is you'll agree.

The occasion for these outbursts is usually, of course, Iraq. But when the subject comes up it is striking how little time is spent talking about Saddam Hussein and what should be done about him. There is a ritual acknowledgment that he is not a nice man, and then the real denunciations can begin. America is a rogue state; don't let them fool you, it's all about oil (or alternatively all about Dad); George W. Bush is a cowboy, a simpleton, a recovering alcoholic, a madman, a usurper. . . . But readers of *The New Criterion* hardly need to be taken through the whole litany.

According to Günter Grass, "the president of the United States embodies the danger that faces us all." Grass speaks, alas, for a large slice of European opinion. And if you have read the recent effusions of John Le Carré ("the United States of America has gone mad") or Harold Pinter, you will know that British calumniators of America can be every bit as shrill as their Continental counterparts.

No one who is exposed to current British anti-Americanism as it is exhibited on the BBC, for instance, will want to underestimate it. (The night before writing this I tuned into a BBC program about Iraq and found the narrator happily harking back to the days of American "hysteria about Commies": par for the course.) Still, there is one consolation. For the moment, at least, the disease is probably less virulent and widespread in Britain than it is in France, Germany, or most other parts of the world.

British anti-war sentiment also concentrates much of its fire on a local target—the obvious one, Tony Blair. He is scorned as a poodle and excoriated as a jackal. A tabloid switches to red ink so that it can devote its front page to portraying him with blood on his hands. "Obscene," if it still means anything, is the only word for some of the hideous cartoons about him in *The Guardian* and *The Independent*.

Above all, there is disaffection in his own party. At present, it is fairly muted. Most of his critics still cling to the hope that he can persuade Washington to hold back. But if war comes, open rebellion seems inescapable.

These are difficult days for Blair. Trade unions are showing renewed militancy. The stock market is on the slide. Some of his most important plans for the public services have come unstuck. His feud with the chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, has grown worse. And amid all his troubles,

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he has taken a stand on Iraq which may yet cost him his political life.

Under the circumstances, many of Blair's former critics have begun to take a much more favorable view of him. Yesterday he was presiding over a deplorable project to "re-brand" Britain. Today he is holding together the Anglo-American alliance. If the alternative is Jacques Chirac or Gerhard Schröder, he looks pretty good.

Yet Blair is still the same man he was, and his "project," albeit in less flamboyant form, goes marching on: the British are still being re-branded. Given the contradictions, it is tempting to draw a distinction between Blair himself and the Blair government—and there are times, indeed, when he seems strangely isolated. But no, he is prime minister, and he can't be absolved from responsibility. His office is where the buck stops and where the big initiatives begin.

Recent Blairite measures include a proposal to replace the present House of Lords with a second chamber appointed wholly by the government (or by a government-appointed intermediary), and legislation designed to put enormous pressure on leading universities to accept more students from poor families.

In reality, whether through conviction or because of existing pressures, universities are already falling over themselves to admit such students—provided they come up to the requisite standard. But that last provision means that more remains to be done, and what is now being imposed is a form of affirmative action. The minister responsible has also announced that he is abolishing the last of the grammar schools—independent schools which were once the backbone of the English education system.

While many of the government's policies are wearisomely predictable, it is still capable of springing surprises. Some of the proposals in its new Sexual Offences Bill, for instance, have struck most commentators as downright bizarre. But perhaps by now we should have have got used to the peculiar combination of coerciveness and permissiveness which the bill enshrines.

One of its clauses makes any form of sexual activity which takes place in the open air a criminal offense, punishable by imprisonment. Come into the garden, Maud, but don't make love there. You could just wind up doing six months in jail.

At the same time, the bill goes out of its way to specify that there is nothing wrong with sexual activity in a public lavatory, provided it takes place in a cubicle with the door closed. Needless to say this is meant to be a friendly gesture towards gays, though as such it is somewhat at odds with the ban on open-air sex. The most celebrated centers for alfresco intercourse in London are the gay cruising-grounds of Hampstead Heath and Clapham Common. (Some AIDS workers have proposed that trees on the Heath should have free condom-dispensers attached to them.) If the bill were meant to be enforced to the letter, which no doubt it isn't, it would be as anti-gay as pro-gay in its effects.

The government is also trying to cope with the problems of immigration. Poor government. It decides to vet asylum-seekers on arrival in Britain, in an effort to keep out terrorists—a not unreasonable move, you might suppose, but one that has been bitterly assailed from the left. It also introduces a set of requirements for applicants for British citizenship, and comes under fire from the right for not including even a token acquaintance with British history among them.

The critics have a strong point, which is that the requirements are almost all concerned with rights rather than duties, with Britain as a provider of welfare rather than as a society with it own traditions. But would history—the we-were-wrong history that gets taught in schools today—really redress the balance? It might only make things worse.

The defects of contemporary history-teaching have often been aired. Much less gets reported about the teaching of geography, but a new study conducted by Alex Standish, a geographer at a university in

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Kent, throws a depressing light on what is going on. The religion of environmentalism has triumphed and doesn't admit of any disagreement. According to Mr. Standish, one major representative textbook, published by the venerable house of Longman, "leaves pupils with the impression that humans can only cause harm to the environment." At the same time, the Green agenda has replaced the mundane skills which used to be taught, and it shows. One parent interviewed when the report appeared complained that her twelve-year-old son came home from school talking about "renewable energy sources" but that he couldn't identify Africa on a map.

Meanwhile, beyond schools and colleges, the merry dance of contemporary culture proceeds. *The Guardian* offers the front page of its magazine section to a former winner of the Turner Prize, Gillian Wearing: she responds by covering it with the slogan "Fuck Cilla Black." (Cilla Black is a television game show hostess.) Channel Four, the TV channel founded to promote new standards of excellence, presents a program on which a performance artist eats a stillborn baby. The venerable house of Macmillan announces that it is publishing a children's book called *Hello, Sailor* about a gay relationship between a sailor and a lighthouse-keeper: it is "aimed at the over-threes."

Meanwhile the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, has taken time off from screwing up the city's transport system to unveil a volume entitled *London: Cultural Capital*, which is meant to clarify his plans for the arts, leisure activities, and "creative industries." It is written in the kind of jargon that has made "creative" a dirty word, with lots of mind-numbing talk about access and diversity. But such things aren't meaningless. When the report reminds us that cultural life in London is still "predominantly mono-cultural," there is a clear indication of what kind of institutions or events are going to be favored and where funds are going to be directed.

The quest for diversity (which means making Britain out to be even more diverse than it is) has become an almost inescapable preoccupation. The organizers of something called World Book Day, for instance, recently published a list of the ten best literary representations of life in England today. It includes a facetious travelogue by the American writer Bill Bryson, *White Teeth* (Zadie Smith's novel about multiracial families in North London), an attack on "Thatcher's England," a gay sex-and-drugs novel, an attack on multinationals by the environmental correspondent of *The Guardian*, a book about the Manchester club scene by a DJ, and an anthology of black and Asian writing from Birmingham. Whatever the merits of the books on the list, and even bearing in mind that it was drawn up with the help of the public, it is hard not to feel that it leaves large sections of the population—the middle-class population in particular—disenfranchised.

Again, the new director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner, has announced that he wants to stage plays which examine "what it is like living now in Britain." As a first sample he is presenting a play about yardies (Jamaican gangsters) and the "murder mile" where they have made their presence felt in the London borough of Hackney. And then it is on to an anatomy of "Blair's England"—it's hardly likely to be very friendly—by David Hare.

The most timely offering of all, however, is going to be a production of *Henry V*, and in case you can't work out why the play is so topical, Hytner has offered a clue in advance: "it's about an English leader who commits himself to a very dubious war." Get it?

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Theater

Aging youth & a meatless sandwich

by Mark Steyn

Tuning the radio dial while driving through the mountains the other day, I came across a commercial for an Orson Welles recording of a song called "I Know What It's Like To Be Young But You Don't Know What It's Like To Be Old." The title is pretty much the whole song. But I wonder if it's true, at least from the dramatist's point of view. It's certainly the case that young writers can have trouble thinking themselves into characters fifty years older, but at least as often writers creating young characters have trouble discarding their awareness of what comes after: it's precisely because they do know what it's like to be young and old that they find it hard to put aside the latter half of the equation. Craig Carnelia, a workmanlike Broadway lyricist who came a cropper recently on *The Sweet Smell of Success*, wrote a modest hit a few years ago called *Is There Life After High School?*, whose best song, "There's A Kid Inside," is a catalogue of the eternal adolescent lurking inside all of us as the clock ticks on into middle age and beyond:

> "I can hear my band
> That awful band
> Only now it sounds much better
> I can feel my hand
> My trembling hand
> On Michelle's angora sweater."

Very vivid: the fingers quivering over the bra cup. But it's a poignant image, a wistful evocation of loss; it's youth viewed from age. Knowing what it's like to be young without betraying your knowledge of what it's like to be old is what's really elusive. David Lindsay-Abaire's *Kimberly Akimbo*, at the Manhattan Theatre Club, neatly sidesteps that problem with a, so to speak, new wrinkle on teen angst. Kimberly Levaco of Bogota, New Jersey is sixteen years old but suffers from progeria, or at any rate a fictional variant of progeria, without the dwarfism but with an accelerated aging process of 4½–5 times the normal rate. So at sixteen Kimberly has the body of a septuagenarian and is nearing death: Lindsay-Abaire's play is a play on words, a real coming-of-age drama. While her schoolmates are on the brink of their future, she is at the end of hers. It is a meditation on an old theme: life is time, time is life. Time-Life, to coin a pre-converged corporate brand. Henry Luce had it right: Time and Life are what really matter, People and Entertainment Weekly are mere subsidiaries.

The first decision to make in staging this drama is: who plays Kimberly? A young actress covered in stick-on crow's feet? Or an oldster playing down? The MTC has gone with the latter. Kimberly is played by Marylouise Burke, a sixty-two-year-old character actress being given a rare opportunity to carry the evening. You may mistake Miss Burke for an authentic teenager when first you see her: not so much because

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of the girly bangs and bell-bottoms and baggy sweatshirts, but because of the adolescent slouch and the verbal tics, the heavy deployment of whiney melismatics ("Da-ad!" "Mo-om!"). Miss Burke, the ravages of age notwithstanding, also has a beatifically sunny face: she projects a girlish glow. But, at some point early on, you become aware that she is, in fact, a mature woman and that, though she pulls off the trick very expertly, that's what it is: a trick. Miss Burke is in the end an obstacle to accepting Kimberly as a character in her own right. I'm not sure what the answer to this would have been, but then I'm not the one who chose to write a play on this theme.

The evening is about a just-turned-sixteen-year old's effort to reconcile the contradictions of her emotional and physical maturity. The big question is: Will Kimberly get her first romantic kiss before her death? All else is denied to her: as she says matter-of-factly, "I went through menopause four years ago." The playwright's message is: Life is short; make the most of it. Which is a cliché, and a T-shirt slogan: Life is not a rehearsal. Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans. But Lindsay-Abaire surrounds Kimberly with people who have the one thing she lacks—time—and all they do with it is squander it. Mom (Jodie Markell) is pregnant with her second child, but slumped in hypochondria, and wrapped in bandages which, as she explains in some detail, prevent her performing her ablutions alone. Dad (Jake Weber) is a drunk stuck in a dead-end job at a gas station. "It makes things easier in a way not to have any choices, I guess," he shrugs. Aunt Debra (Ana Gasteyer) is a homicidal lesbian ex-con scam-artist. Asked to defer her latest nefarious scheme, she cracks, "My whole life has been later." Kimberly has no later. These people have the opposite problem: granted their three-score-and-ten, they've done nothing with them.

That doesn't mean they've never got around to becoming great painters or to finding the cure for cancer, but that they've failed in all the most basic functions of adulthood: they're pathetically mismatched spouses and horrible, cruel, thoughtless parents. When Kimberly spiffs herself up for a boy she's sweet on, Mom sneers, "You look like a made-up corpse"—which, in a sense, she is. Her parents and aunt are not just physically younger than she is, but also far more childish. On the one hand, Lindsay-Abaire seems to be suggesting that the premature aging of her body has brought forth a precocious emotional maturity. On the other, this great insight gets much shorter shrift than his fondness for illustrating how Kimberly's body is not her only prison by having everyone yell at her.

Several critics have rushed to insist that this is not a "disease of the week" TV movie. And they're right. It's worse than that. The "disease of the week" formula is usually "based on a true story" and, although all the rough edges get smoothed off in squeezing the square peg into the format's round hole, the sense of being rooted in human experience just about survives all the PC accommodations. Lindsay-Abaire, by contrast, is a playwright who lives by extreme contrast, by pushing dramatic juxtapositions that are appealing geometrically, if you're plotting the play by chalking dots on a blackboard, but in no other sense. If you were really interested in the theme, you'd be better off exploring it somewhere anchored closer to "disease of the week" reality. For any loving, caring parents, a child with Kimberly's condition is a denial of the natural order. To lose a son or daughter through a car accident is one thing. But, in this instance, death is implicit and visible every step of the way: her childhood will also be her old age. One can foresee various responses to this that might be interesting and dramatic, but falling back on such stock types as the alcoholic dad, the selfish mom, the screwy aunt is just plain lazy.

Lindsay-Abaire has been taken up by the MTC with such gusto that it seems unfair to raise such basic questions as: Can he plot? Can he write dialogue? Can he sustain character? His three plays at MTC have il-

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lustrated a canny eye for grotesque pegs, usually disease-related, on which he invariably fails to hang any drama. Problem A is plot: he likes a big set-piece, no matter how unlikely. In this case, it's a check-forging racket the aunt cooks up to cash in on Kimberly's geriatric appearance. Miss Burke gets more out of this than you'd think—there's a wonderful moment when she steps on stage in her li'l ol' lady get-up complete with stick and sensible shoes, and her face manages to radiate both all she is and all she'll never be. But it still doesn't excuse the lame gimmicky contrivance of the scene. Problem B is the dialogue. Everyone sounds the same. At one point, mom declares, "I am a straightforward and easy ride. I am the Kansas of wives." You never believe that this thought would arise from this woman. It could just as easily and implausibly be assigned to anybody else. (For a more effective deployment of undramatic topography in dialogue, see Noel Coward.)

This brings us to Problem C: the characters. Lindsay-Abaire assigns traits and leaves it at that. Kimberly is her progeria, dad is his alcoholism, mom her hypochondria, and auntie her kookiness. The fifth character, her sort-of boyfriend Jeff (John Gallagher, Jr.), is also trait-burdened: he represents nerdishness, and so he likes Dungeons & Dragons and anagrams. "Kimberly Levaco" is too much for an anagram hound to resist and so he rearranges her name into "Cleverly Akimbo," which sticks.

That's how Lindsay-Abaire likes to think of his plays: smartly skewed. But I think we've seen enough now to realize that he's like Jeff the anagrammist: he's too pleased with having come up with it to worry about whether it means anything. In David Petrarca's staging you can see and hear the problems: the sets by Robert Brill, the costumes by Martin Pakledinaz, and the score by Jason Robert Brown seem to be for three different plays. Pakledinaz's costumes are contemporary, the score has a kind of 1950s souped-up sitcom feel, and the sets veer erratically across all recent decades and none. The combined effect is that these people inhabit no real time and place. There is no Kimberly Levaco, no matter how hard Miss Burke works. She's warm and persuasive, and her kiss with Jeff is tender and affecting, but there's no there there. That's the problem with David Lindsay-Abaire: he doesn't take enough time.

On the subject of the march of time, are we witnessing the death of camp? The thought was prompted by *Shanghai Moon*, produced by the Drama Dept. at the Greenwich House. It is, allegedly, the hot off-Broadway ticket of the season, but the night I went the laughs were fitful and forced. This is the long-awaited new self-starring vehicle from Charles Busch, who went uptown and mainstream with *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, but is better known to his hardcore fans for such downtown delights as *The Lady in Question*, *Red Scare on Sunset*, *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, and *Psycho Beach Party*. Mr. Busch usually takes the female lead in these entertainments. Indeed, he's been a leading lady longer now than most leading ladies: Catherine Zeta-Jones and Cameron Diaz were still in diapers when Mr. Busch began pouting and flouting. This may be something of a problem. Even within the winking conventions of female impersonation, as Lady Allington—a hardboiled purpose-gal from Chicago who's married well—Mr. Busch looks a little, well, past it. His trademark red wig is short and curly this time, but it seems at times quite as odd as the blonde bangs atop the sexagenarian wrinkles in *Kimberly Akimbo*.

His intellectual admirers have constructed an argument that Charles Busch projects an exquisitely multilayered "sandwich" of attitudes: as Michael Feingold puts it in *The Village Voice*, "First comes the pose; next his pleasure in the pose and his hope that you share it; next his awareness that the pose itself is old and cheesy; below that his sense that it's a female pose of which he can only make a temporary construct; at the very bottom is that basic impulse, always found in a Busch performance, the child's

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pleasure at play and mimicry." I'd say that's one thin sandwich and that Feingold's explanation is like the waitress telling you the Club Special includes complimentary butter, slices of bread, and use of plate. Those of us who take Feingold's metaphor more literally think the essential ingredients are ham, cheese, tomato, and lettuce. Ham is the preferred acting style, cheese is the agreed cheesiness of the source material, the tomato role Busch takes for himself, and there may be rather less lettuce piling up in the box office than its producers had hoped for.

Mr. Busch's pose this time is as one of those Occidental ladies who get shipped east of Suez only to discover that their libido is foaming like a mad dog out in the midday sun. As Mae West sang in *Klondike Annie*, "I'm an Occidental Woman in an Oriental Mood Called Love." You may recall that, a couple of months back, I cited Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse's advice to aspiring authors after their own ill-fated experience on a play called *The Rose of China*: "Have nothing to do with anything with a title like *The Rose of China* or *The Willow Pattern Plate* or *The Siren of Shanghai* or *Me Velly Solly*—in fact, avoid Chinese plays altogether. Much misery may thus be averted. All heroines of Chinese plays turn out in the end to be the daughters of American missionaries, kidnapped by Chinese bandits in their infancy."

But, aside from the poor-man's-Butterfly approach to East/West relations, there is also the somewhat later genre, exemplified by Somerset Maugham's *Rain* and *The Letter* and John Colton's *The Shanghai Gesture* (recently seen in New York for the first time in eighty years in a somewhat pointless PC rewrite) and by their screen cousins from the early Thirties—*The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, *Shanghai*, *Shanghai Express*, *Shanghai This*, *Shanghai That*. It is these movie versions that Busch has in mind in a play that tells the story of Lord and Lady Allington's visit to Shanghai to acquire an ancient Manchu artefact for the British Museum from the collection of the sadistic warlord General Gong Fei. As Lady Allington declares, "I'm simply *mad* for Orientalia"—and General Gong Fei's Orientalia in particular exert a strange exotic attraction. The usual complications follow, as well as the usual jokes. Directed with a sultry flounce by Carl Andress on B. T. Whitehall's set of overwrought chinoiserie, Busch and his cast just about hold together a perfunctory plot that, even at ninety minutes, runs out of puff in the final reel. Even spoof depends on fresher contrivances than these.

But, even while deferring to the many layers of Mr. Busch's sandwich, when you peel them all away you're left with the question: why do we need a parody of a form no one's done for real in sixty years? My distinguished colleague John Simon suggests the play's chief function is to allow critics "an opportunity to parade their arcane knowledge of cheesy old flicks." But the curious similarity of the reviews gives off a strong whiff of some camp equivalent of Cliff's Notes—everyone cites the same examples and uses the same insider lingo, like "pre-Code," the apparently standard designation for the steamy era in which this genre flourished in Hollywood. I got the vague feeling that many critics were faking their "arcane knowledge." The only question is: why? Ignorance of an obsolete minor movie genre is nothing to be ashamed of. When *Austin Powers* spoofs 1960s British legover spies, there's a sporting chance most of the target audience will get the references. *Shanghai Moon*'s target audience, on the other hand, would seem to be people who remember Herbert Marshall.

Most people, of course, don't remember Herbert Marshall. A pity, really: he was a fine actor, and a distinguished veteran, who lost a leg in the Great War. I prefer my Hollywood stars in the Marshall mode rather than in the George Clooney/Sean Penn one. But it seems to me that at *Shanghai Moon* the audience recognizes not the films Busch is spoofing but previous campy spoofs of other old movies. They acknowl-

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edge not the specific details of the genre under review but the broader stylistic tics—a certain stiffness in the acting, ripeness in the dialogue, crudeness in the ethnic characterizations.

Busch seems to know this and so, whatever his love of the originals, his approach is broad enough to verge on the slapdash. Take the Herbert Marshall character, Lord Allington, played by Daniel Gerroll. He's old, tweedy, wheezy, and infirm, though his most pressing ailments seem to involve his bowels. Doesn't smell right to me. The Englishmen in these stories were not aged and sick, but merely rather dull and dutiful. They were handicapped only by their Englishness, and their fear that what would be really disabling would be to surrender to passion. Their bowels were not an issue. Indeed, I would venture to suggest that the average Englishman east of Suez had better functioning bowels than the average American, if only to judge from the commercials on the network news. In other words, these were young, healthy, vigorous men who channeled their health and vigor into areas other than their wives. This isn't a preoccupation only of Orientalist literature. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, for example, the Eurotrash lounge lizard's appeal to the young ladies is that he awakens their sexuality in ways the decent, respectful English stiffs are unable to do. These themes tended to be underplayed in the movie versions, but they're still present, not least in the Bette Davis version of *The Letter*.

Whether or not the theme of Englishmen sublimating their sexual repression in imperial gusto is either valid or novel, it could hardly fail to be more interesting than a lot of generic bowel jokes. One might even propose that, given the right spin, an investigation of the psychology between east and west could even be topical. So, unlike my fellow critics touting their "arcane knowledge," I feel the spoof suffers from being insufficiently well-rooted in the genre. But who cares? What Michael Feingold's analysis neglects to mention is that this is a sandwich with the meat deliberately taken out: Busch wants us to admire the stylistic quirks and mannerisms divorced from anything real. That's a viable proposition when the quirks and mannerisms are still part of our cultural vocabulary—that's basically how *Austin Powers* operates—but not when, in pop culture terms, it belongs to the remote past. A misfiring spoof of an obsolescent genre is a fine emblem for a New York theater that revels in its nostalgic irrelevance. Charles Busch loves the old Hollywood he ransacks over and over, but this is the most overworked seam in the whole mine, and it's tapped out.

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Art

"Matisse Picasso" at MOMA QNS

by Karen Wilkin

When the great Matisse retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art ended, in January 1993, it was followed for one amazing week by an unpublicized epilogue—a small show that could only be described as modernist heaven. Improvised at the last minute by the retrospective's curator, John Elderfield, the two-room installation set a nearly ideal selection of iconic Matisses among equally iconic Picassos. The Matisses included the Baltimore Museum of Art's *Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)* (1907) with her wrenched hip, the Pompidou's sketchily brushed trio of nude bathers, *Le Luxe I* (1907), the monumental *Bathers with a Turtle* (1908) from St. Louis, and their austere, near-abstract sisters, *Bathers by a River* (1909–1910, 1913, 1916) from the Art Institute of Chicago, plus three of MOMA's bronze *Backs*. The Picassos, all from MOMA's own holdings, included the hefty *Two Nudes* (1906), against a red curtain, and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). If you cared at all about the complex history of twentieth-century art, the show was near-perfection, an eye-testing demonstration of how potent ideas are stated, absorbed, and transformed by artists' practice and, at the same time, an uplifting tribute to the power of sheer visual inventiveness. But if spending time with this astonishing assembly was exhilarating, it was also exhausting. The rare, perhaps never to be repeated, opportunity to see, side by side, widely dispersed pivotal works that had often been made in response to one another demanded that you look hard and think hard. You were forced to call upon all your accumulated knowledge of the early years of twentieth-century art history, weigh some of your most cherished assumptions against first-hand experience of seminal paintings, and ponder difficult questions about the characteristics of Matisse's and Picasso's efforts, about each one's strengths and weaknesses, and about what each one thought of the other.

I suspect that I learned more from my daily visits to MOMA that unforgettable week than I had in years of graduate school. Certainly the show forced me to consider even familiar paintings freshly and helped me to enlarge and clarify ideas that I had formulated over years of looking at the work of both artists. It compelled me to sharpen my sense of the similarities and differences between these two idiosyncratic giants. It was plain that each was alert to what the other was doing, early on. It was plain, too, that both had been hit hard by the 1907 Cézanne exhibition at the Salon d'Autumne, organized as a tribute following the painter's death the previous year. Cézanne's tense bathers and pulsing landscapes, his monumental forms and meticulously placed touches of tone, reverberated, in different ways, in every one of Matisse's and Picasso's works in the epilogue. The 1907 exhibition was not the ambitious young artists' first

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confrontation with Cézanne, but it was probably the most concentrated group of his works they had come across. It seems as if the encounter impelled them to spend the next ten years or so exploring the implications of what they had seen.

Yet if the two were united by a common admiration for Cézanne, they learned different lessons from him and applied them in very different ways. Both took as their point of departure the inherent contradiction of Cézanne's paintings—their dependence on two simultaneous but apparently irreconcilable kinds of perception; the carefully adjusted tonal relationships of Cézanne's pictures evoked mass and volume, while their deliberately placed patches of pigment asserted that the canvas was a flat surface of particular dimensions, covered with touches of a particular substance. For Matisse, Cézanne's work became an endless source of inspiration and confirmation for his own effort to reconcile his acute perceptions of the three-dimensionality of the perceivable world with his equally acute awareness of the two-dimensionality of his media. Matisse eventually achieved this with expanses of unmodulated color and eloquent shapes, an approach apparently very unlike Cézanne's pursuit of nuance, but one that nonetheless embodies and expands the most radical notions implicit in the Aix master's work. Picasso, however, seems to have assimilated the appearance of Cézanne's paintings rather than their essence. He exaggerated their inherent planar articulations, along with their (perhaps inadvertent) wrenched forms and tipped spaces, and exploited the resulting prismatic structure neither to suggest bulk nor to create tension between allusion and the fact of paint, but rather to evoke shattered form and the penetration of mass by space.

Illuminating as MOMA's brief, telling combination of masterworks was, it ultimately raised more questions than it answered. So when I learned, about five years later, that an exhibition entitled "Matisse and Picasso: A Gentle Rivalry," examining the links between the two artists from the 1930s until Matisse's death, was at the Kimbell Art Museum, I made plans to go to Fort Worth, despite my reservations about its curator, the extremely fashionable Harvard professor of art history, Yve-Alain Bois. On balance, I'm glad I went, since the show brought together a good many first-rate works ranging from the familiar to the little known. But the underlying premise was what is called in academic circles "over-determined." Bois's metaphor for the relationship of the two artists was a chess match—a one-on-one struggle to defeat the opponent completely, based on a set of prescribed moves and countermoves. It was, to put it politely, a remarkably reductive description of a multivalent, fluid conversation between colleagues who fundamentally admired and respected each other, however strong their rivalry—not to mention their happening to be among the most alert, inventive, and iconoclastic human beings of modern times.

Fort Worth's "Matisse and Picasso" made some illuminating comparisons, but much of it was based on crude similarities and simplistic notions of direct cause and effect. Bois insisted, for example, that whenever Matisse drew or painted a woman resting her head on her folded arms on a table, it was an homage to Picasso, while whenever Picasso included a window with a wrought iron grille, it was a tribute to Matisse. Maybe. The news, however, wasn't all bad. I kept hearing that MOMA was planning a full-scale examination of the still provocative question of the relationship of Matisse and Picasso, with John Elderfield and the perceptive British art historian John Golding at the helm. Something to look forward to and await impatiently.

Now the wait is over. After showings in London and Paris, "Matisse Picasso," organized by an international team of curators consisting of Elderfield and Golding, with Kirk Varnadoe, Elizabeth Cowling, Anne Baldassari, and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, has been elegantly installed at MOMA

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QNS.[1] The show is essentially an expansion of that tantalizing epilogue to the Matisse retrospective—the core of the exhibition is once again the pairing of *Les Demoiselles* and *Bathers with a Turtle*—extended to span the period between the two young artists' initial awareness of each other's work, in the first years of the twentieth century, and 1954, the year of Matisse's death. The most striking thing about the show is its intelligence. It's a subtle, thoughtful exhibition that refuses to dwell on obvious similarities of theme or tidy chronological overlaps, but instead attempts to reveal something of the half-century long, wordless conversation conducted by a pair of extraordinary artists who were variously and sometimes simultaneously colleagues, peers, friends, fans, and rivals. It's possible to revel in the show simply as an assembly of perfectly splendid works by both artists, but if you're willing to make a little more effort, "Matisse Picasso" hints at deep-rooted studio relationships—the way artists, even extraordinarily original and inventive artists, mine each other's work. It's possible to follow Matisse and Picasso as they treat each other's efforts as provocations, stimuli, or triggers. You watch them assimilating and transforming each other's declarations, sometimes "correcting" the initial proposition, at other times swallowing it whole, and at still others (as when Picasso flirted with Surrealism while Matisse ignored the whole thing) rejecting it. Minor events in one artist's work turn up as major ones in his colleague's and vice versa; small implications are turned into entire campaigns. And so on.

"Matisse Picasso" begins by introducing the protagonists through a pair of self-portraits painted in 1906, the year they were introduced by the Steins. (Matisse was thirty-six, Picasso a little more than a decade younger.) The Spaniard looks uncharacteristically introspective, eyes downcast, holding a palette—but no brushes—his stocky figure and dark eyes accounted for through fluent drawing and simplified forms. Matisse looks at once bold and a little nervous in his striped sailor's shirt, gazing past the viewer at an unseen mirror, envisioning himself, it appears, through the filter of his awe of Cézanne. Already, the differences are apparent. Picasso, who rarely worked from life, presents a highly conceptualized *idea* of the artist; touch and surface seem secondary to narrative; color is purely expedient. Matisse offers a scrupulously observed but far from literal accounting of his perceptions and emotions translated into the language of paint; form is implied by unexpected chromatic shifts. This dichotomy is made even more explicit by one of the show's many inspired pairings: Matisse's *The Studio, Quai Saint-Michel* (1916–1917, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.) and Picasso's *Painter and Model* (1928, Museum of Modern Art, New York). Matisse's light-suffused, brushy picture is at once immediate, intensely specific, deeply rooted in real experience, and all about invention. You recognize the view of the Seine and the *Ile de la Cité* out the window, note the zig-zag of the parquet, the flowered red cloth, and the turned legs of the chairs, all familiar characters in Matisse's repertory, at the same time that you are riveted by the rigorous, almost independent, geometry of the painting's structure, its exquisitely modulated surfaces, and its surprising palette, keyed off of a range of gray-browns. Picasso's densely loaded canvas is no less inventively constructed, but it is once again highly conceptualized. Where Matisse makes you aware of his constant measuring of his "sensations" against the pictorial demands of the painting, Picasso asserts his will, imperiously tracing a kind of emblem of the studio and then separating zone from zone or amalgamating them with bright colors that seem

1 "Matisse Picasso" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, Queens, New York, on February 13 and remains on view until May 19, 2003. The exhibition was previously on view at Tate Modern, London, from May 11 to August 18, 2002, and Les Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, from September 25, 2002 to January 9, 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Museum of Modern Art (368 pages, $60).

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more theoretical than observed; blue rectangles signal "window," for example. (This isn't a value judgment—just an observation.)

Some groupings demonstrate documented historical links between works. Others, like the pairing of the Phillips and MOMA studio pictures, embody difference, while still others suggest how artists experience one other's work. The best sections of the show, such as an eye-opening assembly of early Matisse and Picasso nudes that includes canvases and Matisse's 1909 sculpture *La Serpentine*, or a stunning array of portraits from the Teens and a little before, do all this at once. It is a crash-course in the evolution of modernist painting to be confronted by Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein and his implacable, bare-breasted *Woman with a Fan* (1908, Hermitage, St. Petersburg) in the company of Matisse's icily beautiful portrait of his wife from the Hermitage with its mysterious blue-greens, his fierce characterization of the margarine tycoon/Cézanne collector Auguste Pellerin in his velvety black suit, and his delicious portrait of the actress Greta Prozor, at once fashion plate and *tour de force* of how unstable flat planes can invoke the figure. Geometric simplification vies with inflected paint handling; suggested volume and assertive drawing wrestle each other to the ground. You watch as ideas are thrown, caught, altered, and flung back, only to be altered once again.

Nowhere is this more elegantly manifest than a section devoted to sculpture. Picasso's vigorous, angular 1909 bronze *Head of a Woman (Fernande)* states the theme in terms of staccato, syncopated rhythms. A couple of Matisse's series of bronze heads of *Jeannette* (made between 1911 and 1916) announce his response: female features, a neck, and piles of hair transformed into swelling, interlocking forms with articulate profiles. Some years later, Picasso apparently saw an exhibition of the *Jeannette* series. His response? A group of heads composed of bulging, biomorphic forms that seem equally triggered by the sensual classical features of his mistress of the period, Marie-Thérèse Walter, and the sculptural ideas posited by Matisse's bronzes. In between, Matisse appears to have explored still other implications of both his own and Picasso's sculpture in his heads of *Henriette.*

Sometimes, this kind of exchange appears to have been direct and almost immediate, but sometimes it seems to have taken years, as if the artist had been unable to free himself of an idea or an image posited by a painting or sculpture. The thought-provoking association of Picasso's angular, planar sculpture *Woman in a Garden* (1931–1932, Reina Sofia, Madrid) with Matisse's radiant *gouaches coupés*, *Zulma* (1950, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen) and *Creole Dancer* (1950, Musée Matisse, Nice) reveals surprising likenesses of shape and form in these otherwise tenuously related works, despite their disparate mediums. These similarities, then, elicit thoughts about the relationship of linear, open-constructed sculptures, such as the exuberant *Woman in a Garden*, to the tradition of paper collage—from which constructed sculpture traces its origins, via Picasso and Julio González—and by extension, consideration of the connections between Matisse's painted and pasted papers and "traditional" Cubist collage. The point is eloquently enlarged upon by the brilliant association of a selection of Matisse's most seductive and economical *gouaches coupés*, the blue nudes of 1952, with some of Picasso's similarly economical, ingeniously folded, painted sheet metal sculptures of about a decade later.

All of this is amply and illuminatingly discussed in the exhibition's handsome, lavishly illustrated catalogue. The only caveat is that the reproductions hint, frustratingly, at works seen at one or another of "Matisse Picasso"'s other locations, absent from the New York showing. Not that you are shortchanged by what is on view at MOMA. Quite the opposite. It is, in fact, hard to single out high points among the consistent riches of this sharply focused, clear-headed show. Aesthetically, its strength may be its examination of the artists' connections in the

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mid to late Teens, the years when Matisse's highly selective assimilation of Cubist notions stimulated him to paint a disproportionate number of what are arguably his most powerful and most inventive paintings. It's impossible to deny the impact or the enlightening effect of seeing Matisse's *Piano Lesson* (1916, Museum of Modern Art, New York) beside Picasso's *Man Leaning on a Table* (1915–1916, Pinacoteca del Lingotto, Giovanni and Marella Agnelli), since, together, the brittle, densely loaded, squeezed rectangles of the Picasso and the generous, thinly painted, luminous planes of the Matisse seem like opposite sides of the same coin. But everything counts. A terrific selection of drawings by both artists easily competes with such stellar comparisons of celebrated pictures. A series of drawings of heads holds some real surprises, including a pair of portraits of the dancer Léonid Massine by both Picasso and Matisse. The liquid-eyed *premier danseur* looks downright pretty in Picasso's delicately shaded, rather saccharine drawing, while Matisse's more angular, frontal head seems more dispassionate and less flattering. Another fine group of drawings, mostly from the early 1930s, reprises the artist and model theme. Here, Matisse toys with visual possibilities of multiplicity, conflating images of the model, her reflection, and the drawing that emerges under his pen—fictions of fictions, firmly based on observation—while Picasso puts the motif through a series of stylistic variations, from a hypersensitive neoclassicism to a near-Baroque play of light and dark.

Each series of related—or disparate—works adds another layer of complexity to your sense of the complicated relationship between the two painters. It's obvious that each took the other's measure early on and remained alert to what he was doing for the rest of his life. At times, there seems to have been simply a heightened state of awareness; at other, there was a real dialogue. But as you move through the installation at MOMA, you are conscious of other voices that keep trying to break in—not only Cézanne, but Ingres, Poussin, Delacroix, Braque, and Bonnard, among others—although it's also clear that Picasso and Matisse put pressure on each other in a different way than any of their peers or ancestors. Yet each remained utterly individual.

In a sense, each artist is defined entirely by the hanging of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* next to *Bathers with a Turtle*. At first, Picasso looks like the radical, because of angularity and the stylistic disjunctions of his great picture. Almost a century after it was painted, *Les Demoiselles* still looks daring, still disturbs. And yet, longer acquaintance reveals it to be, after all, a rather traditional composition of large-scale flesh-colored nudes, with a rather traditional narrative. It is, in fact, *because* of that underlying scaffolding of convention that *Les Demoiselles* retains its power to shock. You measure Picasso's sharp-edged anatomy and spiky forms, his faceted background and mask-like heads, against your knowledge of traditional statements of his motif and conclude that violence has been done. Matisse's monumental bathers, by comparison, seem calm, classical, Italianate; it comes as no surprise to learn that he had visited Italy around the time that they were painted. Yet another paean to the Golden Age, you may conclude, given the stylized outdoor setting and the opulent flesh. But spend time with these magnificent nymphs and anxiety begins to creep in. Just what *is* going on? In the end, it doesn't matter. The picture is all about painting, about how passionately perceived form and mass can be conjured up without compromising the continuity or the materiality of the expanse of paint on canvas. It's about the eloquence and emotional potency of color, about the history of its own making, perhaps even about the history of painting itself, made new and unexpected. No shock value, just a profound meditation on the most fundamental aspects of picture-making. *Les Demoiselles* may clamor more loudly, but *Bathers with a Turtle* has the staying power. But don't take my word for it. Take the 7 Local to Queens and see for yourself.

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Marsden Hartley & American modernism

by James Panero

America is an unenlightened nation. America is predestination, transcendentalism, superstition, and sin. Walt Whitman famously wrote that "the real and permanent grandeur of these States must be their religion." Behind the outgrowths of positivism, democracy, and free enterprise, there runs in America that thick grove of spirituality. Thank God.

Spiritualism blanketed the United States in the nineteenth century with its mixture of revivalist bible-thumping, theosophy, and Revelation. This spiritual cocktail produced Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. It also unearthed the dark hearts of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe—those mid-century masters who sowed the literary seedbeds of modernism with a combination of primitive spiritualism and cosmopolitan sophistication.

Yet it took the following generation, primarily those born after Reconstruction, to advance the visual arts to where Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe had taken the literary field. Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), Arthur Dove (1880–1946), John Marin (1870–1953), and many others translated the dark spiritual lyricism of these writers to the picture plane in a way that would not just rival but also depart from, influence, and often surpass European models. In the fine arts, there had certainly been many American talents. Yet American painting's proverbial slavishness to European schools was only underscored through much of its history by transnational talents like Benjamin West and James McNeill Whistler, artists who not only followed European styles but who also became, themselves, Europeans.

No painter has come to embody better the brooding vigor and new, native spirit of American modernism at the turn of the century as Marsden Hartley (1877–1943). In mind as well as action and body, the painter from Lewiston, Maine, a woebegone member of the Stieglitz 291 circle, came to epitomize the dark mysteries and contradictions of his literary antecedents. In photographs, especially in Stieglitz's iconic portrait from 1915–1916, Hartley's striking visage stares back—pointed ears, pinched snout, Roman nose, avian brow. His eyes, a milkweed white, seem blind. Certainly no great American painter has more fascinated and eluded art history than this physiognomical sphinx. As a living artist Hartley avoided commercial success in the same way that he now deflects quick judgment. Recalling those words that Charles Baudelaire reserved for Poe, Hartley's existence might well have been more stable had he "been prepared to regularize his genius and apply his creative gifts in a manner more suited to the climate of America . . . another—a crude cynic, this one—tells us that however fine may have been his genius, it would have been better for him to have had no more than talent, talent always

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yielding easier returns than genius." Instead, his life was

> but a vast prison in which he ran about with the fevered restlessness of a creature born to breathe the air of a sweeter-scented world—nought but a great, gas-lit Barbary—and that his interior, spiritual life as a poet, or even as drunkard, was no more than a perpetual effort to escape the influence of that antipathetic atmosphere.

Well, these are rather dire assessments (even ignoring the anti-American undertones in Baudelaire's harangue). Yet for Hartley, perhaps even more than for Poe, the words hold true. Following a 1943 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and Barbara Haskell's Whitney Museum of Art survey in 1980, Hartley is now enjoying only his third comprehensive exhibition *ever*, with over one hundred works at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford.[1] This fact alone should give students of modernism some pause. The triumph of Abstract Expressionism and the New York School in the 1950s heralded the absolute supremacy of post-war American art. It also demoted the legacy of the first generation of American modernists, especially the circle of Stieglitz (in deference to regionalists like Thomas Hart Benton). It may be an interesting intellectual exercise in the era of blockbuster cockfights to match up the likes of Mark Rothko with Dove or Jackson Pollock with Hartley. These artists have all now enjoyed major American surveys in the past decade. Who can say which artist would come out on top? Considering the successes of the Hartford show, Hartley should at least get even money.

Whitman wrote that "the whole earth and all the stars in the sky are for religion's sake." Few painters have been more attuned than Hartley to the spiritual importance of location both as subject matter and physical place. Writing from Berlin in 1922, for example, Hartley mentioned that: "I am working on some New Mexican landscape recollections. . . . These landscapes are more vivid in the sense of nature than they were when I worked from the same thoughts in New York."

Both urban and rural, Hartley lived in New York, Berlin, Paris, the south of France, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and central America before declaring himself "the painter from Maine" in 1937. As one of the first artists to work comprehensively in all-over abstraction in 1912 (in Paris he became acquainted with Robert and Sonia Delaunay and Gertrude Stein; in Munich he met many of the Blaue Reiter group), Hartley turned to the figure late in life at a moment when the vogue finally came around to abstraction. Mirroring his peripatetic existence, his painting style at various times borrowed from a hatchwork of neo-impressionism (Giovanni Segantini), German expressionism (Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc), French post-impressionism (Paul Cézanne), and Symbolism.

Yet while Hartley's formal paint handling owed debts to others in the avant-garde, his insatiate desire and spiritual yearning guided his development in sometimes wild and erratic ways that were his own. These are the forces that molded him into a formidable artist. The challenge for any Hartley show of scale is to capture this wild bird in its cage. In Hartford, the curator Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser clearly found some difficulty in holding Hartley down. Hartley wriggles and wanders off at the show's many turns. Yet in the show's lack of resolution and through its own distractions,

1 "Marsden Hartley" opened at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, on January 17 and remains on view until April 20, 2003. The exhibition will also be seen at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., from June 7 to September 7, 2003, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, from October 11, 2003 to January 11, 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Wadsworth Atheneum in association with Yale University Press (304 pages, $55).

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we are perhaps given the more honest assessment of Hartley's career. Emerson wrote that travel was "a fool's paradise," although he elsewhere stated that "all educated Americans, first or last, go to Europe." Hartley's wanderlust perfectly captured this contradiction. One might read Hartley's homosexuality and his antinomian spiritualism, cut with Calvinist sour grapes, as two of the forces that drove him on, yet his movement was both an exploration of emotion and the escape from it. It is not altogether clear what force drove him at any given time, and I doubt he knew himself.

Paul Rosenfeld said of Hartley in 1924: "Someday, perhaps some day not so far distant, Hartley will have to go back to Maine. For it seems that flight from Maine is in part flight from his deep feelings." It has been said that Hartley never stayed more than two years in a single place, and judging from the wall labels at Hartford—which attempt to declaim his every move—this nearly holds true. In one head-spinning room mid-show, for example, the three wall labels read "New Mexico 1918–1919," "Europe 1921–1930," "Return to the United States 1930." Hartley at times necessitates a roadmap.

While Hartley escapes the declarations and resolutions typical of most survey exhibitions, in Hartford one still finds enough of a critical mass of top work to discern three periods of stylistic development: an expressionism that fades to all-over abstraction in the symbolist fantasies of *Musical Theme (Oriental Symphony)* (1912), painted in Paris, and the pre-war pageants, officer paintings, and "Amerika" series from his first stay in Berlin; the Cézanne- and Fauve-inspired landscapes from Vence, Aix, New Hampshire, and New Mexico from the 1920s and early 1930s; and the primitive figuration and portrait work from the mid-1930s that carried him through the end of his career.

Hartley's search for spiritual significance in the everyday was borne less of Emerson's and Thoreau's giddy pantheism than the white-washed iconoclasm of the protestant New England aesthetic. Paintings became Hartley's scrapbook of totemic images, symbols, and idols that he scavenged throughout his travels: New England iceblocks, birds, and fish; teutonic crosses, shields, and cockades; American Indian tepees and war canoes. He stayed remarkably pure in his symbolic assignments. None of the religious and imperial motifs of his Berlin paintings, for example, ever entered into his New England pastiches.

Hartley worked best in series. Highlights of the Hartford show center around those instances where Kornhauser has captured at least parts of them (you always hope for more). The exhibition begins with some splendid neo-impressionist portraits of what Hawthorne called "earth's undecaying monuments." *Carnival of Autumn* (1908) with its gummy clouds and *The Ice-Hole, Maine* (1908–1909) with its jelly-blue pond are two paintings from a ten-part series of the same mountain range near North Lovell, Maine. The scenes are neo-impressionistic and skilled, although in the heavily mottled paint and earthy tones they evoke a spiritual darkness unlike the positivist chills of Hartley's European models.

Hartley flipped the pulsing anima of these earliest works inside out in the near-abstract paintings that soon followed. In the Paris and Berlin series, one gets the sense that Hartley has mined the depths of his most personal work for us to see. The War Motif series from 1914, seven of which have been here collected, depict the abstracted dirge for Hartley's German lover Karl von Freyburg, who at twenty-four had perished on the front. These paintings marked a high-point in Hartley's artistic achievement. He called the style "subliminal or cosmic cubism." With their paste-up assemblies of flags, shields, esoterica, and glyphs, much of it does resemble the synthetic cubism of the time. Picasso's writing of "Ma Jolie" may read as a challenge and sendup to formal concerns. Yet Hartley's "Kv.F" in the lower left register of *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914), like the hex of Hawthorne's scarlet

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letter, communicates an epitaph and death sentence. The gravity of Picasso's and Hartley's letterings are completely at odds.

While the return to landscape, now in a Cézannean and Fauvist mode, was a significant step and advance for Hartley's development in the 1920s—in these far-off landscapes he mitigated his loss from the Great War—it was his discovery and his new flirtation with figuration that proved to be his next great contribution to American modernism. Here we find his most majestic, idiosyncratic, and perfected treasures. In his *Portrait of Albert Pinkham Ryder* (1938), the skullcap, eyebrows, beard, and haircoat all seem to run into each other on this American old master. In *The Last Look of John Donne* (1940), the white chalky stripes of a death shroud embrace the angular face of the dying with two white hands. In his primitivist Mason series, the Maine family becomes a stand-in for a biblical passion play that gets sadly acted out through the real-life drowning of the Mason sons. Then there are the beefcakes: the muscle-bound beach boys, fishermen, and jock-strap sport heroes of Maine that represent not only Hartley's spiritual longing but also, most likely, his earthly desires. The times of Hartley's life allowed room for such sexual ambiguity.

If Hartley garners additional attention in the near future, it will most likely be due not to painterly achievement but to his new place at the table of queer theory. This is regrettable not because Hartley was gay, but because enlisting him in this ideological program seriously undermines the mysteries and depth of his work. It gives a political spin to the profound spiritual questions of his career. It also turns typically decent critics into armchair postmodernists with disastrous results. Here is what John Updike had to say about some of Hartley's Berlin paintings in the *New York Review of Books*:

> Just as one should not hasten to patronize Hartley's positive view of a more innocent Germany, one should not rush to read anal symbols in his celebration of military manhood. But inviting sphincterlike rings dominate *Himmel* (circa 1914–1915) and the thrust of phallic penetration is alarmingly vivid in *Military. The Aero* (circa 1914), the catalog explains, "takes its name from the flaming red spot in the upper half of the canvas, which is meant to depict the flames at the rear of a dirigible engine." Zeppelins with their flaming anuses frequently passed over Berlin—"a fascinating thing which transports one somehow every time one sees any of them," Hartley wrote Stieglitz in June of 1914.

"Flaming anuses passing over Berlin"? Marsden Hartley deserves more than the Preparation-H treatment of art history. Yet as we contemplate the upcoming Matthew Barney spectacle at the Guggenheim, it would seem that a restrained, academic, and difficult show like "Marsden Hartley" does not stand a chance. Not in the New York of today, at any rate. Like a single-occupancy vehicle, Hartley is currently banned from Manhattan. What will it take to bring this American modernist to the forefront of public attention? We may need to wait another twenty-five years to find out for sure.

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The Cleveland Orchestra settled into Carnegie Hall for four separate concerts. At its helm was its new conductor, Franz Welser-Möst. Well, he ceded his duties for one concert to Mitsuko Uchida, the pianist, who served as both soloist and conductor. They all get the itch, don't they? Even some singers eventually pick up the baton (e.g., Fischer-Dieskau, not to mention Plácido). Itzhak Perlman, by the way, has now started to conduct. He leads the Berlin Philharmonic in a new all-Mozart album from EMI. It's a good recording, too.

Franz Welser-Möst is a still-young Austrian who has replaced Christoph von Dohnányi, who directed the Cleveland for just under twenty years. Dohnányi found an orchestra in subpar shape and restored it—almost—to the glory it had known under George Szell. Previously, Welser-Möst made his mark at the Zurich Opera and with the London Philharmonic. For almost fifteen years now, he has been an up-and-comer—and he's still up-and-coming.

The first of the Cleveland's concerts began with the Beethoven Quartet in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131. Hang on, though: Wasn't this an orchestral concert? Yes, but the Cleveland offered the arrangement for string orchestra fashioned by Dimitri Mitropoulos, the late Greek conductor. Orchestras should not have to borrow from the quartets, as they have plenty of fine Beethoven of their own. But this arrangement is a worthy addition to the repertory, or, rather, a worthy supplement to it.

Under Welser-Möst's baton, the first several movements went nicely, being well paced, well breathed, and uncluttered. Every voice was clear, and nothing was unduly heavy. The music had the feel of a string quartet. The mighty Clevelanders seemed to be operating as chamber players. But the performance broke down in the Presto movement, which was all too orchestral—and badly orchestral, at that. It was leadfooted and balky, instead of light and fleet. It was sloppy and uncoordinated, too. Overall, however, Welser-Möst and his band did admirably with Mitro's little experiment.

Following intermission was Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*. Here the ensembleship problems of the orchestra sadly worsened. Welser-Möst had a hard time keeping his forces together, with the harpist, in particular, uncertain as to the beat. The entire performance was rather stilted and unflowing. It was careful, planned: self-conscious. In all, this reading was so oddly shaped, I felt the urge to run home and bathe with the Szell recording of the work.

The concert ended with Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, in which Dame Felicity Lott, the British soprano, was soloist. Dame Felicity is one of the outstanding Strauss singers of our time, and, on this occasion, she was her usual tasteful self. She was not much helped

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by the conductor and orchestra, however. Welser-Möst's accompaniment was largely artless. As in the previous piece, the playing was often precious and awkward. In the final song, "Im Abendrot," the orchestra was barely moving, barely breathing. This is not Strauss; it is not "Im Abendrot." This is a manufactured profundity, trying to pass for a real one.

Once the music faded away, Welser-Möst held his hands in the air for a dramatically long time. In doing so, he was keeping the audience's applause at bay. But he had not earned his silence, actually. Magical, transfiguring, dumbfounding moments happen naturally, or they don't happen at all. If an audience is too rapt to applaud, they won't—conductor's hands in the air or no hands in the air. Richard Strauss has no need of gimmicks. (Neither does Felicity Lott, for that matter.)

The Cleveland Orchestra will probably always be under a microscope. Herr Welser-Möst will have to understand that, if some of us are extra-hard on him, it's because we care so much about the orchestra whose leadership he has assumed. By now, surely—he has been on the job since the fall—he understands!

Those who care about opera—especially the big, heavy soprano parts—have followed the career of another British soprano very closely. Like the Cleveland Orchestra, Jane Eaglen is under a microscope. She appeared with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by its one-time music director Zubin Mehta. She sang both the Immolation Scene from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and the Final Scene from Strauss's *Salome* (known by some of us as "the mad Liebestod").

Eaglen has suffered some vocal problems, and this particular outing was not reassuring. Not that she was a total flop. As the orchestra was finishing Siegfried's Death and Funeral Music—which preceded the Immolation Scene—Eaglen walked purposefully to the front of the stage, like a general preparing for battle. Once she reached her position, she stood her ground. She was claiming her space. I remember that, in a master class years ago, Leontyne Price made an emphatic point of this: that a singer had to claim her space on the stage. Eaglen looked commanding and ready to sing.

When she did so, however, she was frequently off pitch, tending to the sharp side. Her sound was sometimes hooty, sometimes hooded. Many of her entrances were not clean. But it must be said that she evinces a certain visceral power, and the ability to portray Brünnhilde—particularly in the Ring's fiery finale—goes beyond the mere vocal. In Salome's Final Scene, Eaglen was adequate: but she did not exploit this music fully. She could have been more incisive, more imaginative—madder. Strangely, she felt the need to use a score. That was a sight, Salome calmly turning pages as she was losing her head (having cost someone else his)!

In the opera world today, there aren't many who can sing Jane Eaglen's *Fach*: Brünnhilde, Salome, and the rest of the leather-lunged gals. It's encouraging, however, that the radiant Deborah Voigt is assaying her first complete Isolde this season. Still, we need Jane Eaglen healthy—"we," the opera-going public, and, in particular, the Wagner-loving public.

Arcadi Volodos, the young Russian pianist, is universally regarded as a phenomenon. But he's more than that, thankfully. Volodos is the rare chap who is both finger-freak and musician, both virtuoso and artist. He stopped by Carnegie Hall with James Levine and the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, in Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 3 in D Minor. This is a Volodos specialty, almost inevitably. In fact, he has recorded this work with Levine and the Berlin Philharmonic. It is a live recording. Volodos is one of the few who can record this piece without much studio touch-up.

The fluency of his technique borders on unbelievable. One has to rub one's eyes, or check one's ears. The speed, the volume, the accuracy: All these elements are somewhat historic. But they are all in the service of the

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music, fortunately. Volodos gave the Rach Third great character, not merely tossing it off (although he is capable of that). Afterward, the audience demanded an encore—at least one—and he obliged by giving them a saucy little transcription from *Carmen*. We need our pure-souled, poetic pianists, in the Dinu Lipatti mold—but it doesn't hurt to have our Titans of the Keyboard, too. And when a pianist is all-capable: That is a pianist worthy of the name. Arcadi Volodos approaches that ideal.

Another important pianist, Radu Lupu, the seasoned Romanian, also performed recently. He played Beethoven's Concerto in G Major, with Lorin Maazel and the New York Philharmonic. Lupu is known for cerebral, rather manly Beethoven, and this occasion was no exception. The concerto started promisingly: Lupu rendered the opening—which is so frequently botched—simply and effectively. But as the music proceeded, he failed to savor some of the juicier passages, and he did not sing out. This is not a smooth pianist, frankly. He is unbothered by choppy playing; he does not much prize beauty or "line." Many of his ideas in the Beethoven were unconventional, veering toward eccentric. But, on the whole, this reading had solidity and command, which are Lupu hallmarks.

One final note on a pianist: Garrick Ohlsson did something out of the ordinary, constructing a series called *Busoni at the Keyboard*. These were three recitals exploring the works of Ferruccio Busoni, plus those of two other composers extremely important to him: Bach and Liszt. (The recitals took place in Alice Tully Hall.) We are used to seeing the name Busoni with a hyphen in front of it, as in "Bach-Busoni"—and Busoni was, indeed, a master transcriber. But he was also an energetic, highly intellectual, and ambitious composer in his own right. His works have more than a passing interest—if we can find a pianist who can play them.

Busoni was a great virtuoso, and he wrote for himself, in the grand tradition. Garrick Ohlsson is a pianist who can handle and perpetuate him. In the first of the recitals—the only one I was able to hear—Ohlsson was magisterial. His passagework was effortless; his tone was poetic and right; his phrasing was beautiful. He knows how to thunder without banging, retaining an essential musicality. He can take a messy, sprawling piece of music and impose order on it, both through his fingers and through his brain. When he is at his best—which he is not every time, of course—Ohlsson is a model of what a big, Romantic pianist should be. Busoni would have been pleased.

Now to a vocal recital—and, believe it or not, a tenor recital. It's a mystery why these events are so rare. You can hear a soprano, a mezzo, or a baritone in recital practically any night of the week. (Basses, like tenors, are less common.) But the tenor seems virtually banned from the recital stage. Fritz Wunderlich and Peter Anders stand out because they are exceptions. And it has been a long, long while since either sang.

Several years ago, John Pfeiffer contributed liner notes for a reissued recital by Jussi Bjoerling, the historic Swedish tenor. Pfeiffer wrote, "The opera tenor who ventures onto the recital stage inevitably recalls Dr. Samuel Johnson's observation about lady preachers: 'Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.'"

Well, Stanford Olsen not only undertook a recital—in Weill Recital Hall—he executed it well. Olsen is a high, lyric tenor renowned for his appearances in bel canto opera. As it happened, it was a consistent pleasure to hear him in lieder and other songs. He devoted the first half of his program to six lieder of Schubert and six of Wolf. Olsen has a superbly beautiful voice, which he uses nimbly and expressively. Of note about this voice is that it's just as lovely soft as it is loud. Its beauty does not depend on heft; neither is it reduced by heft.

Some might have complained that his traversal of the lieder was a bit superficial, not probing enough. But this critic, for one,

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appreciated the fact that Olsen didn't "act" excessively in these songs, or smother them in (presumed) intellection. Too many singers—poor ones—think that, in offering lieder, they are presenting papers in psychology. Olsen never forgot that this was music, in addition to poetry and drama.

A particular treat on the second half of the program was a group of *arie antiche*—such as Alessandro Scarlatti's "Violette"—but performed in old-fashioned transcriptions! This was a bold, audacious act. Before they began, the tenor's accompanist, Douglas Fisher, issued a little apologia to the audience. He explained that recent researches into "period authenticity" had rendered these transcriptions obsolete and, in a way, verboten. But he and Olsen had grown up on these versions and loved them, so . . . they were going to indulge themselves, with the audience's blessing. No apology need have been issued. Olsen sang these songs both beautifully and tastefully, and I dare say their composers would have approved.

The first encore was the most famous *aria antica* of all: "Caro mio ben." Before singing it, Olsen offered the opinion that this particular transcription was really, frightfully over-the-top. Again, he needn't have been so sheepish. Musically, the thing was guiltless. I considered it a sort of glorious "up yours" to the Period Polizei.

Finally, a trip to the opera—or rather, two trips. The Met unveiled a new production of *Jenůfa*, one of Leos Janáček's masterly operas (joining *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *The Makropoulos Affair*). This was an unalloyed triumph. "Unalloyed triumph," of course, is one of the tritest critic's phrases in the lexicon—but it applies here.

Jenůfa is a rare tale in that it is both heartwarming and gripping. It involves the lovely and good Jenůfa, the two brothers who want her, and the two women who watch over her. It serves up jealousy, violence, betrayed hopes, murder (infanticide, no less), spiritual perseverance, and redemption. The title role is an extremely inviting one for a soprano, and, at the Met, it was handled superbly by Karita Mattila. Jenůfa is a character who is forced to grow, and Mattila grew right along with her. She showed that she understood the part, and she heaped plenty of vocal excellence on it. In addition, Mattila is an eminently likable singer. There is something in her manner. She wins an audience's affection early, and keeps it. One simply roots for her.

A second leading role in this opera is that of the Kostelnička, Jenůfa's stepmother. It was taken by Deborah Polaski, who is a sought-after Elektra (and who was powerful in that role earlier in the Met season). She made an imperious, cutting, unnerving Kostelnička, as she should have done. This is a singer who is not afraid to be raw, where the score and story demand it, or allow for it. Her Act II soliloquy was truly terrible, in the original sense: dread-inspiring. Polaski has a tendency toward stridency, but we could also call this operatic vitality, or urgency.

Last, what could be more fun than *The Abduction from the Seraglio*? This is Mozart's "Turkish" opera, and it shows an amazing side of him: the ability to be jokey, silly, sublime, and divine, all at the same time. This gift is not conferred on every boy, and it is not even conferred once a century.

Starring as Osmin at the Met was the German bass Kurt Moll. He has been doing this for a long time: starring as Osmin at the Met (and elsewhere). The Met's current production had its debut in 1979, and in the spotlight during that first run was, of course, Kurt Moll.

He has not lost a step. After his performance this January, it was hard to say which was better: his singing or his characterization. He is a marvelous Mozartean basso, and he is a brilliant comedic actor. That about does it, for Osmin. Moll's voice is a single instrument, united from bottom to top (and there is a great distance between them). He has an uncanny ability to sing on pitch, hitting the center of virtually every note. He is a bass of real nimbleness and subtlety—he is not bluff, nor does he resort

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to bluffness. The lines out of his mouth are clean and musical.

Even if he were a much lesser singer, he would score as Osmin merely on the strength of his acting. He is unerringly comic without—astonishingly—being hammy.

In the part of Kostanze was Alexandra Deshorties, a soprano from Montreal. Much of her singing wasn't pretty. She was harsh in her upper register, and overly contained elsewhere. But she did much that was admirable. She was accurate and assured, and she evinced dignity and—here's a word that has gone out of style—womanliness. Her aria at the beginning of Act II was unusually expressive, with each word and note full of meaning. Shortly after came Kostanze's killer aria, "Martern aller Arten," on whose rack many a soprano has died. Not this one, however. She sang the aria bravely—and not unmusically—conveying the resolution and defiance that her character must have.

On the night I attended—the season premiere—we were treated, or rather, subjected, to a little opera within an opera. In the eleventh row, smack in the middle, sat a booer. He booed Alexandra Deshorties—loudly, hysterically, and not a little disconcertingly—almost every time she sang. You seldom hear this kind of thing in an American opera house. The man was not permitted to return for the third act; he later became a minor celebrity in the opera press. The truth is, Deshorties was not a perfect Kostanze—but she was a praiseworthy one. The only thing worse than a lout is a lout with bad judgment.

Opera note

Les Troyens, by Hector Berlioz,
at the Metropolitan Opera, New York.

There are two varieties of Berlioz. The first is the "subscription concert" Berlioz: the composer known for his concert overtures, the *Symphonie Fantastique* and, on a good day, the *Harold en Italie* viola concerto. The characteristics of this variety are vivid orchestral textures, memorable themes, agreeable brevity, and lots of noisy bits. Then there is the "private" Berlioz. This is much bigger category and runs from the vaguely familiar (*Les Nuits d'été*) to the lesser known (*L'Enfance du Christ, Roméo et Juliette*) on its way to the obscure (*Lélio*). Works of the "private" Berlioz suggest a predisposition for the voice, avoidance of the sonata form, a more pronounced degree of literary inspiration, and a more extended development of musical and literary themes. For various reasons, these works also pay a considerably larger emotional dividend to the listener. Despite their extroverted "subscription concert" qualities, Berlioz's three operas have more than their share of the obscurity of the lesser known "private" works. The paradox is that one of them, *Les Troyens* (The Trojans), is not only Berlioz's greatest work, but probably the greatest French opera of the nineteenth century. Thirty years ago, one commentator wrote that the opera is "one of the few neglected masterpieces of opera . . . which remains to be rediscovered"—a statement that, despite recent revivals, still largely holds true.

That is not to say that the Metropolitan Opera has not tried to do its part to improve matters. In acknowledgment of the bicentenary of Berlioz's birth this year, the Met commissioned a new production of *Les Troyens* by Francesca Zambello. This production, which premiered on February 10, features a number of technical debuts: sets by the late Maria Bjornson, costumes by Anita Yavich, and choreography by Doug Varone. Costumes and choreography were stylish and attractive, the sets less so: for two acts the stage was overlooked by a huge, abstract iris and pupil formed from long metallic splinters. The third and fourth acts featured a curved plexiglass panel that reminded me of the drive-in root-beer stands of my youth.

Musically, the performance was uneven. The orchestra was lush and clearly directed, but the singing, at least initially, was uncertain. The tentativeness of the principals,

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Cassandra and Aeneas, was met with an inert audience that sat silent until the fall of the second-act curtain. By Act III the performance steadied. Singers and audience alike came alive and began responding to each other. Nevertheless, the audience remained confused.

The effort of getting *Les Troyens* performed eventually killed Berlioz. He started the work in 1856 and completed it almost two years later. The work is based on two books of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a poem Berlioz had started reading with his father at La Côte Saint André more than forty years earlier. The opera moves from the fall of Troy through the flight of Aeneas and his men to Italy to establish the new Troy—Rome. On the way, Aeneas's party, exhausted from its wanderings, makes landfall in northern Africa where Aeneas meets and falls in love with Dido, queen of Carthage.

When *Les Troyens* was completed, Berlioz was something of an outcast. A prolific and trenchant critic, he angered opera administrators and performers by his withering—and riotously funny—reviews. His unpopularity delayed production for almost five years. Moreover, despite its wonderful libretto, *Les Troyens* appeared late in the day for grand opera: Wagner's star was just beginning its long ascendance and five-act works in the style of Halévy and Meyerbeer were passé. To get the work performed at all—at the famous Théâtre Lyrique—Berlioz had to consent to the work being halved: *La Prise de Troie* and *Les Troyens à Carthage*. For many years, the two parts were offered separately. It is hardly surprising that neither version caught on—think of truncating almost any opera you care to mention, and ask yourself whether the result would have been artistically satisfying.

Nevertheless, one could not help remembering the old "two opera" view of the work at the performance under review: the two parts are quite dissimilar. In the first (where the Trojans believe that the Greeks have abandoned the struggle after nine years, leaving behind the wooden horse), Cassandra largely dominates the action with her warnings that something is seriously amiss. Both Deborah Voigt, as Cassandra, and Ben Heppner, as Aeneas, were occasionally overwhelmed by the orchestra, even in relatively mezzoforte passages. Aeneas's brilliant aria, *Du peuple et des soldats*, for example, in which he tells of the death-by-sea-serpent of Laocoön, sounded weak and rushed. By contrast, Cassandra's stark *De mes sens éperdus*, heard over the triumphant Trojan March accompanying the procession of the horse into Troy, created a real sense of horror. Overall, one felt that Cassandra and Aeneas were trying a bit too hard. But the balance between singers and orchestra improved in the second act, and the suicide scene and death music of Cassandra were fine indeed.

In Act III, Dido, sung by Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, was immediately effective. The palace scene, in which she presents trophies for agriculture and industry to her people, was nicely balanced with the chorus (which performed admirably throughout). Ms. Lieberson's poise as Dido brought out a more effective Aeneas in the second half of the work. That sense of her early relaxed elegance contrasted all the more sharply with her furious rage at the end of the opera when abandoned by Aeneas. Another effective pairing was that of Narbal, Dido's advisor (sung by Robert Lloyd), and Anna, her sister (sung by Elena Zaremba), in the wonderful aria and cavatina *De quels revers menaces-tu Carthage*.

Much of the criticism of Berlioz stemmed from the sprawling and panoramic scope of his works. *Les Troyens*, the grandest of all, suffered most. Yet, like other large-scale works, Wagner's for example, it reduces itself to manageable and accessible components. It has, moreover, the advantage of containing some of the most touching and beautiful music ever written. Perhaps Emmanuel Chabrier had the best response to tendentious criticism of Berlioz: "He put variety, color, rhythm into . . . [his works] . . . and to people who say there isn't any unity, I answer, 'Merde!'"

—James F. Penrose

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The media

Himalayan self-righteousness

by James Bowman

By the time these words are published, the United States will, by most estimates, have gone to war with the vile Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. God willing, the war will be over. Although I was never quite persuaded that anyone outside of Iraq itself had as much to fear from those fabled "weapons of mass destruction," which the administration went to so much trouble to adduce as its *casus belli*, as from the effort to eliminate them, I didn't see how it was possible for any ordinarily decent person not to regard at least with sympathy and admiration any effort of diplomacy or military intervention which promised to end the dictatorial reign of a man who deserves, if anyone alive in the world today deserves it, the adjective "evil." Saddam Hussein's long career of murder and torture and attempted genocide against the Kurds is well-documented and hardly in dispute even among opponents of the war. Yet those opponents don't seem to care very much about this.

On the contrary, many of them, to judge from the demonstrators who came to Washington in January, are much more exercised about the evil of what the spy-novelist John le Carré, in an astonishingly intemperate and ill-written piece in *The Times* of London, called "the Bush junta." Where do such ideas come from? "Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld: The Real Axis of Evil," read one of the signs brandished by the demonstrators. Oh really? Do they suppose that fair-minded observers will simply assume that they missed the news reports of Bush's having taken out and shot Gore supporters, or tortured the close relatives of Colin Powell, or gassed the Muslims of Detroit? Surely they can't imagine that such preposterous claims will be taken seriously by anyone who knows anything about the geopolitical realities of which they purport to speak?

My guess is that they do not. The worst of them—those belonging to the organizing group ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) which, as Byron York pointed out in *National Review*, is a front for a Stalinist splinter group called the Workers World Party—are presumably embryonic Saddams themselves (only one, as both the Stalinist and the Saddamist examples teach, could hope to succeed) and take the attitude of the King in *Huckleberry Finn* who said, "Ain't we got all the fools in town on our side? And ain't that a big enough majority in any town?" The best of them, motivated by a sentimental disinclination to violence of any kind, simply mouth slogans in the hope, perhaps, that having stayed the hand of justice they might inspire an answering clemency and gentleness in one of the world's most brutal thugs. As one of several accounts of the demonstrations in *The Washington Post* reported, "'War is not the answer,' said Mary Appelhof, 66, of Kalamazoo, Mich."

Not, perhaps, coincidentally, this was the

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slogan spelled out in black sequins on the T-shirt of Sheryl Crow at the American Music Awards a few days before. The *Post*'s reporter, Manny Fernandez, apparently did not think it worth his while to ask Mary Appelhof, 66, what she thought *was* the answer. Or even what she thought was the question to which war was not the answer. Did Mary have any particular experience in military or diplomatic affairs which might have made her views, either of questions or of answers, of interest to the *Post*'s readers? Perhaps Mr. Fernandez thought that some such question would have been embarrassing to her. Though naturally she was entitled to her opinion like anyone else, usually that opinion has to be better informed and put into some terms other than a T-shirt slogan to make it into the papers.

But of course the central truth that lies behind the idea of "demonstrations" in the first place is that those who otherwise have no natural claim upon the attention of the American public acquire not only a claim but also a right to such attention by making public nuisances of themselves in certain prescribed ways. The logic of the media culture, whether that of *The Washington Post* or TV news or the supermarket tabloids, is that Middle Eastern scholars who have studied the Iraqi regime for years may or may not make their voices heard, depending on how original or unusual their message, but that Sheryl Crow, or a group of women who take their clothes off and spell out "Peace" on the beach, as they did in California and Australia, will always be heard.

You might think that the media themselves would resent being used in this way. After all, most reporters, even those who cover demonstrations, have had to mug up some of the relevant history and intelligence data on the basis of which America's leaders would be basing their decisions about war and peace. They know enough to know that glib talk of their elected leaders as a "junta" or an "axis of evil"—or leftover slogans from the 1960s like "war is not the answer"—is incommensurate with the gravity of the problems which the administration, however fallibly, has been trying to address. Why, then, should they risk their own credibility by lending space on their platform to ninnies like the naked peaceniks or poor Ms. Appelhof? The reason, it seems to me, is the same as the reason for most of the ills of journalism in the third millennium: the myth of journalistic "objectivity."

Let me explain. Having acquired, at least in his own mind, a measure of moral authority through mythic and triumphalist accounts of the role of his forebears in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and the Watergate affair, the contemporary journalist craves more of it. And he sees that this authority depends absolutely on his status as a higher arbiter to which both sides in any political debate must appeal. That status in turn depends on preserving at all costs the fiction of the journalist's neutrality and objectivity. In order that this fiction may be preserved, it is absolutely essential for the journalist to treat with complete seriousness even views that he knows to be foolish or idiotic. No matter how ridiculous, stupid, or ill-informed the position of one side or another in any political debate, or whether it is expressed in sober speech or print in a recognized forum or in the Grand Guignol of street theater, he must treat it with exactly the same respect as he does the other side.

Knowing that by the logic of his own self-conceit the journalist must give equal weight to the views of, say, Paul Wolfowitz and Mary Appelhof, 66, of Kalamazoo, Mich., fringe groups like ANSWER push themselves forward as spokesmen for what might, in other hands, be a sensible and responsible alternative to current policies, and recite in complete confidence of being safe from contradiction, except from those they oppose, blatantly absurd charges against and characterizations of their country's leaders. And, so accustomed have we become to intemperate language on both sides of our public debate, with charges of corruption and dishonesty now almost

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routine even in serious journals of opinion, that even those anti-warriors who on their own would be intelligent, judicious, and well-informed think it not worth their trouble to rebuke their fellow-marchers on occasions like these, figuring that that is just the way the game is played.

As indeed it is. The ineffable rightness of the anti-war protesters of the 1960s acts as a kind of indemnity for any amount of wrongness on the part of their heirs and successors. Hence the boilerplate of editorial-writing minds is that the country is benefitted and even strengthened by the "tradition of protest" or the "right to dissent." Even the Administration has taken this line, inspiring *The New York Times* to editorialize:

> Mr. Bush and his aides, to their credit, welcomed the demonstrations as a healthy manifestation of American democracy at work. We hope that spirit will endure in the weeks ahead if differences deepen and a noisier antiwar movement develops. These protests are the tip of a far broader sense of concern and lack of confidence in the path to war that seems to lie ahead.

This is typical of *Times* writing and editing these days, like calling the older protesters "grayheads" so as to avoid the sexist implications of the more familiar "graybeards." That "tip of a far broader sense" is a fractured metaphor, broken off from the old, expected "iceberg," which is here transmogrified, incomprehensibly, to a mere "sense." Though senses may be broad, they do not have tips. And of course any adverting to the more traditional view that marchers in the streets, so far from being a manifestation of American democracy, are a contradiction of it, or to the mere point of information that the "obvious mainstream roots" of the protesters extolled by the *Times* were consistent with their being organized by Stalinists, was deemed unnecessary.

Underneath the surface, one supposes that this kind of thinking takes a perverse sort of pride in public slanders against elected officials. Yet, as Byron York pointed out, there was little reporting in the mainstream press of what the protesters were actually saying, as

> speaker after speaker condemned the United States with ancient Communist rhetoric: "revolution," "struggle," "oppressed peoples," "imperialism," and "liberation." One speaker even addressed her fellow protesters as "comrades." Given the impressive strength of the public-address system, it felt like a literal blast from the past. And if the subject had not been so serious, it might have seemed almost quaint.

Though generally sympathetic to antiwar protest, the media may well have been embarrassed about such rhetoric. In any case, more interesting to reporters than any underlying political tendency of its own was the evidence of ANSWER's organizational skills. David Montgomery in *The Washington Post* wrote that

> Mass movements typically make their pilgrimages to that Sweet Land of Tourists between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial. Marching up and over to the other side of Capitol Hill is rare, if not unprecedented.
>
> The savvy organizers of the International ANSWER coalition—who last brought 100,000 peace demonstrators to Washington on October 26—may realize that the national march as a form of public expression is teetering on the brink of cliché and self-parody. They're adding a couple of twists:
>
> When the marchers reach the Navy Yard, their "people's inspection team" will demand to search for weapons of mass destruction. And the route itself—to what the organizers call a "working-class" neighborhood—may help bring the peace movement closer to The People.

Who, that is, cared about the marchers' antique rhetoric in comparison with their

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kinky, po-mo street theater and their cleverness in evading "cliché and self-parody"? Unable to comment on the substance of the speeches, or on scurrilous characterizations of our leaders, for fear of compromising their neutrality and objectivity, the media found it easy to retreat into what for many of their younger and more highly-educated personnel is in any case the more comfortable role of literary or cultural critics. And in sizing up the effectiveness of the theatrical elements, the really sophisticated ones among them can be relied upon to point out that the workings of government are also theater. Thus, when a miscellaneous group of "Green" protesters turned up for a counter-demonstration to the President's State of the Union address with music and allegedly "satirical" video clips presented on a giant screen on the National Mall, Mr. Montgomery wrote that "From start to finish, it was a sometimes brilliant, sometimes ragged piece of political performance art. It wouldn't have worked without the foil of the establishment theater going on inside the domed building."

The establishment—what was that again? Well, let's let Mr. Montgomery explain it to us:

> The State of the Union is itself highly ritualized political performance art. The House sergeant-at-arms sounds Elizabethan as he heralds the arrival of the commander in chief. While the vice president, in his big chair, seems to slumber with his eyes open, the president's soliloquy follows strict rules. The last innovation came in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan perfected the homey salute to carefully planted real Americans in the gallery. At the end, God's blessing is requested, the scene cuts to Statuary Hall for the dueling spin doctors, then network correspondents sum it all up in ways that never quite match your own impressions sitting at home.

Well, sure. Don't know why it never occurred to us before. So in other words, Bush's tightly argued presentation of the case for war before the "establishment" forgathered in the Capitol was the same *kind* of thing as the hippies outside with their "video collages of warplanes, corporate logos, oil derricks, Ronald McDonald, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, bombed cities, dead bodies and the question: 'Is this the world you want?'" As one of the organizers outside told Montgomery with unconscious humor, "We want to make sure the American people know that people are thinking critically and they have an alternative to the Bush agenda." Though alternatives that were not merely negatives were markedly thin on the ground, thinking critically was, after all, what Montgomery himself supposed he was doing.

But if you think that the mountainous self-importance of journalists is a revolting spectacle, try the positively Himalayan self-righteousness of poets, which seems to grow in inverse proportion to the volume of the general desire actually to read anything they write. When the First Lady invited a group of them to the White House in February to celebrate the poetry of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, and Emily Dickinson (hmm, a gay man, an African-American, and a woman; I wonder if there could be any significance in that?), one of them inevitably tried to turn it into an occasion for showing off to his hostess his finely-honed moral and poetic sensibilities with respect to her husband's war-mongering and managed to get the thing cancelled. Naturally, the outcry at this "suppression of dissent" from "the poetic community" was immediate. "I think there was a general feeling that the current administration is not really a friend of the poetic community and that its program of attacking Iraq is contrary to the humanitarian position that is at the center of the poetic impulse," said Stanley Kunitz, a former "poet laureate."

It takes a certain—shall we say?—self-confidence to characterize one's own as the only "humanitarian position," even when the alternative position is not, as it is in this case, the lifting of the yoke of a terror-state from off the necks of its subject peoples.

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Such smugness is not the self-evident outcome of a life spent counting syllables. Or not counting them, as the case may be. But the mystery of its provenance is solved for us by Jay Parini, who was quoted by Martin Arnold in *The New York Times* as saying that poets' greater insight into the moral and ethical implications of international affairs is owing to the fact that "our language is pure, and politicians abuse language." Arnold himself is very much of the same mind, noting that "The common theme among poets seems to be their belief that the beauty and precision of their use of language can make a difference."

Oh! So that's it. In "beauty and precision" lies their title to moral superiority. Well, here's Lawrence Ferlinghetti's idea of beauty and precision, from a poem posted on the Poets Against the War web site:

> And a vast paranoia sweeps across the land
> And America turns the attack on its Twin
> Towers
> Into the beginning of the Third World War
> The war with the Third World
>
> And the terrorists in Washington
> Are drafting all the young men
>
> And no one speaks

That's five declarative statements packed into forty-six words of admirable clarity and every one of them demonstrably false. There's precision for you. Or consider Hayden Carruth's apostrophe to President Bush:

> . . .To recapitulate your
> wrong-doings is unnecessary; the topic
> is large and prominent and already
> occupies the attention of historians
>
> and political scholars, whose findings
> will in the near future expose your
> incontinent and maniacal ambition
> for all to see. Let it suffice to
>
> say that you have warped the law and
> flouted the will and wisdom of the
> people as no other has before you.
> You have behaved precisely as a tin-pot
>
> tyrant in any benighted, inglorious
> corner of the earth. And now you are
> deviously and corruptly manipulating
> events in order to create war.
>
> Let us speak plainly. You wish to
> murder millions, as you yourself
> have said, to appease your fury. We
> oppose such an agenda—we, the people,
>
> artists, artisans, builders, makers,
> honest American men and women,
> especially the poets, for whom I dare
> to speak. We say, desist, resign,
>
> hide yourself in your own shame,
> lest otherwise the evil you have
> loosed will destroy everything
> and love will quit the world.

Let us speak plainly! Let us let those words of "beauty and precision" sink in for just a moment. Having said that he wishes to murder millions (I really must start reading the papers more carefully), Bush must resign in shame "lest otherwise" his evil will destroy everything and, as if that weren't bad enough, love will quit the world. Mind you, once everything is destroyed, there doesn't seem much point in love's continuing to hang around anyway, does there? But though illogical, these are presumably the kinds of words that Martin Arnold hails for their beauty and precision. "Poets have been clearing away sloppy thoughts since the beginning of literature," he assures us happily. This is true enough. But as our contemporary anti-war bards remind us, they have also been committing more of their fair share of sloppy thinking, and for approximately as long. Carruth's "political scholars" of "the near future" may find themselves shocked to discover that, in our time, it was the politicians who told the truth and the poets who lied.

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Books

E pluribus plurimum

by John Derbyshire

A few weeks ago I happened to acquire a copy of Carleton Coon's 1965 book *The Living Races of Man*. What a gem! Coon was an anthropologist—was in fact Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His book is a world-wide survey of human types, with a thorough classification into races and sub-races, buttressed by a wealth of physiometric, linguistic, and archeological data. The real fascination of the book, though, lies in the illustrations at the end: One-hundred-twenty-eight black-and-white photographs of human beings from every part of our planet. "A Russian Lapp" . . . "A Tungus woman" . . . "An Ainu man of Hokkaido" . . . "A Mayan-Spanish Mestizo of Yucatán" . . . "A Negrito woman of Mindanao" . . . "An Irishman from County Cork" . . . "A farmer of Rajasthan" . . . "A Vedda of Ceylon" . . . "A young Zulu woman." . . . Leafing through these pictures, one marvels at the sheer physical variety of humankind, at the astonishing diversity of our common species. At the same time, of course, one cannot help but reflect that no respectable publisher (Coon's was Alfred A. Knopf) would contemplate bringing out such a book nowadays. Nor, for that matter, would any anthropologist think of submitting one.

Peter Wood is Professor of Anthropology at Boston University, and in the book under review he has taken diversity as his title and his topic.[1] This is not, however, the diversity that is so apparent in Carleton Coon's photographs. A great deal of water has flowed under the bridge since 1965, and it is nowadays considered a breathtaking violation of good manners to notice the kinds of things that Coon made it his life's work to study and elucidate. Wood's topic is the doctrine of diversity as it is pressed on us by the great and the good—by, that is to say, college administrators, corporate human resources officers, producers of plays, movies, TV shows and artworks, politicians, church leaders, and, when all efforts at persuasion and propaganda have failed, trial lawyers. Such a book is long overdue. Amidst all the cant of our age, there is probably no word more prominent or ubiquitous than "diversity," yet I am not aware of any previous attempt to encompass this concept in a way that is properly skeptical, yet accessible and thorough.

Concept? Doctrine? Dogma? What is it exactly, this "diversity" we are all enjoined to celebrate with such enthusiasm? Peter Wood declares that it is an ideology. He explains:

> The word [i.e., "ideology"] is not neutral; rather, it registers my judgment that *diversity* offers a closed loop of thought and experience. Once one enters this loop and accepts the main propositions of *diversity*, it is difficult to see out of it.

1 *Diversity: The Invention of a Concept*, by Peter Wood; Encounter Books, 351 pages, $24.95.

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Note the italics, which are the author's. Throughout this book, he italicizes the word "diversity" wherever it refers to this ideology he is discussing, in order to distinguish this sense of the word from its older meanings. From this point on, I shall follow the same practice, for the same reason, and also to give my reader the flavor of Wood's approach.

Where did it come from, this ideology of *diversity*? Peter Wood notes the oddity of the fact that such a powerful idea, energetically propagated across the whole of society for a quarter of a century, has no founding text to refer to, was inspired by no charismatic teacher, was carried forward with no mighty struggles or cruel reverses, has roots in no significant philosophy. "It arrived unparented," says Wood, "as a kind of collective emanation of ponderous academic silliness." We just woke up one morning and there it was, demanding that we "celebrate" it. In its impact on the individual psyche, *diversity* is indeed an ideology in the sense Wood describes; yet it is a shallow and trivial one—essentially a folk superstition, a pop-culture fad like the Hula Hoop or body piercing, with no intellectual moorings at all. One of the author's key insights, in fact, is the lightness and essential frivolity of *diversity*, especially by contrast with actual diversity. As he says at the end of a chapter titled "Diversity Before *Diversity*" (in which, however, I am sorry to see that the labors of Carleton Coon pass unmentioned):

> Once upon a time, Americans encountered the world's diversity with awe, anger, prejudice, disgust, erotic excitement, pity, delight—and curiosity. Then we recast ourselves as champions of tolerant diversity, became fearful of inconvenient facts, and lost interest.

You notice this loss of interest especially among children. In the *Empire Boys' Annuals* of my own British childhood, the human world was a diverse place indeed, populated by head-hunters, cannibals, Polynesian bungee-jumpers, ferocious Gurkhas, exquisitely polite Japanese, reed dwellers, cave dwellers, tree dwellers, suttees, thuggees, fellows who inserted four-inch wooden disks into their lower lips and women who elongated their necks by adding a metal ring every year. Now youngsters are assured that though people who live in foreign parts may sometimes look a bit odd, they are really just middle-class Americans in thin disguise. Little Masai boys like to play soccer, says the "Social Science" textbook issued to my fourth-grader. In China they prefer volleyball. Uh-huh. Is it any wonder that Americans find it difficult to summon up interest in the world beyond their borders? When Longfellow, an Anglo-Saxon Unitarian, used the metrical structure of the Finnish *Kalevala* to write an epic poem about American Indians, he attained diversity without striving for it. The typical diversiphile of today would confidently deride such a production as "inauthentic," while knowing nothing, and desiring to know nothing, about either medieval Finns or sixteenth-century Iroquois chiefs. *Diversity* is a cult for the ignorant, unimaginative, and incurious. The idea that it is beneficial either to individual persons or to society at large is supported by not a single shred of evidence.

Diversity as practiced in the United States is in fact a very pale thing, the magnification and glorification of tiny differences, promoted with all the deep historical and geographical insight of a kindergarten "Our Friends Around the World" class. As Peter Wood says, "We no longer have access to the unalloyed feelings of amazement, repugnance, pity and horror that some cultural differences might indeed warrant." If you seek to celebrate *diversity* by joining the Taliban, subjecting your daughters to clitorectomy, or declaring the intention to throw yourself on your husband's funeral pyre, you will be locked up as a danger to society. My own circle of acquaintance includes several Chinese couples who immigrated during the 1980s. Their American-born children, now entering their teens, are indistinguishable in tastes and habits

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from any other American kids. They eat pizza, follow baseball, memorize Britney Spears lyrics, and introduce reported speech with the "like" construction. Their command of Chinese extends no further than a handful of domestic commonplaces. When they get to college, though, they will be initiated into the mysteries of *diversity*. Kindly mentors will induct them into "Asian-American" student societies, where they will learn that anger, shame, and loathing are the correct responses to the society their parents embraced with such gratitude and relief.

Though the *diversity* ideology lacks any serious philosophical foundations, there are of course origins. A principal begetter was Justice Lewis Powell of the U.S. Supreme Court. Writing a stand-alone opinion in the 1978 case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, Powell asserted that the goal of "attaining a diverse student body" provided a "constitutionally permissible" reason to allow racial preferences in college admissions. None of the other justices concurred with this point, so it has no force in law. Nonetheless, in asserting the desirability of *diversity*, Justice Powell lit such a candle by God's grace in America as (it seems) shall never be put out. Peter Wood gives over his longest chapter to a detailed analysis of the Bakke case, its antecedents, and its consequences, demonstrating all too clearly that Supreme Court Justices are very far from being the best and brightest legal brains of their time, are in fact much more often colorless mediocrities chosen and confirmed because they give the least offense to the largest number of political interests—or nowadays, the worm Ouroboros chewing on its tail, for reasons of *diversity*.

The notion of *diversity* as a thing desirable in itself was not altogether new at the time of Justice Powell's *obiter dictum*. Most race-preference schemes up to that time, however, had justified themselves as remedies for past injustice, looking back to Lyndon Johnson's 1965 Howard University speech, in which Johnson declared the principle of "affirmative action," and to that same president's Executive Order 11246, which gave that principle its name, and charged the federal bureaucracy with the task of promoting it. By 1978 these remedial programs were increasingly unpopular, and awkward question were beginning to be raised about how long it would take to remedy the injustices in question, and how we would be able to tell when the remedying was complete. Justice Powell's assertion that "attaining a diverse student body" is a desideratum by itself, without regard to any past discrimination, was just what the social engineers needed. The ideology of *diversity* was born, and has now spread itself into every corner of our society and culture.

Peter Wood gives a comprehensive survey of *diversity*'s scope. It is most at home in the Academy, of course, and the thirty-one-page chapter titled "*Diversity* on Campus" is one of the strongest in this book, and the most unsparing. Writing of Martha Nussbaum's attempted defense of *diversity* and of her description of the campus as a place where "faculty and students grapple with issues of human diversity," Wood comments:

> The "grappling" is her ennobling conceit for the festering discontents, censorship and fear; the gloating privilege; the rotting intellectual insecurity; and the regnant falsehoods that *diversity* has brought to most campuses. . . . [T]he real world of *diversity* is no idyll. Rather, it brims with tribal vanities, assertions of entitlement, sour anti-Americanism, disdain for freedom and equality, and prideful ignorance.

Whew! As this passage illustrates, Peter Wood is a terrific polemicist, with a lethal gift for exposing cant and a masterly turn of phrase. When reviewing a galley copy like this (that is, a book that cannot be sold after review to my neighborhood second-hand dealer), my habit is to mark the text up with highlighters: yellow for key steps in the author's arguments, red for false or dubious assertions, and green for pointed, well-turned sentences worth quoting in my review. This copy of *Diversity* has much more green than usual—far more than I can

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fit into the space the gentle editor has assigned to me. Here are just a few cuttings from that greenery. On the Academy again:

> *Diversity* only preserves some of the outward appearance of liberal education, while substituting its own antiliberal agenda on every crucial point.

On the use of "diversity consultants" in business: "*Diversity* advocates create the problems that *diversity* consultants are then hired to ameliorate." On the divisiveness of *diversity*:

> Do Americans know how to put their differences aside and work together? For the most part, the answer is definitely yes. Does *diversity* augment this aspect of our national character? No, we manage it *despite* the imposition of *diversity*, which is often pulling in the opposite direction.

On diversity in religious practice:

> As I gauge it, the differences among American religions are small though important; but construed through the lens of *diversity*, the inverse image appears: the differences are huge yet somehow inconsequential.

For all its delights, this is a flawed book, with a hole at its center. Peter Wood is an inhabitant of the Respectable Right, and so is scrupulously deferential to what William F. Buckley, Jr., the leading light of this faction, has called "the prevailing structure of taboos." This book began, in fact, as an essay posted on the *National Review Online* web site. As one so often finds these days with books that seek to challenge current sociological pieties while staying within the bounds of acceptable comment—bounds drawn and vigilantly patrolled by left-liberal opinion elites—this approach weakens Peter Wood's case. Why, after all, is the *diversity* racket so persistent? Intelligent people everywhere scoff at it and constantly make jokes about it. Even TV sitcoms do so. A recent episode of Fox TV's *Andy Richter Show* revolved around a workplace *diversity* wrangle, and had characters uttering lines like: "So I am supposed to celebrate your difference while at the same time totally ignoring it, right?" (I note, however, that this show seems to have been canceled.) Why, when well nigh everybody—including, very likely, some large subset of the diversicrats themselves—knows that it is all nonsense, do we let it go on?

We all know the answer. Without massive gerrymandering of the "affirmative action" or *diversity* type, black Americans would pool at the bottom of postindustrial society even more conspicuously than they currently do. This state of affairs would be grossly offensive to American ideals of justice, equality, and national identity, all the more so in an age like the one we seem to have entered, when our country is under the constant threat of attack by foreign terrorists, and we are being reminded once again that if we do not hang together, we shall hang separately. For an optimistic, idealistic people like ourselves, wishful thinking is an irresistible temptation. We can, after all, always fall back—as Carleton Coon did in *The Living Races of Man*—on the hope that science (in this case, benign genetic engineering) will relieve us of our contradictions before they become too acute. When our idealism conflicts with reality, therefore, it is reality that must yield. Mr. Wood has fallen in with this principle. Races, he declares, "are social conventions, not biological realities." I wonder if he has ever watched the finals of an Olympic men's sprint event? Or looked into *The Living Races of Man*? The real dilemma facing America is that we can have a meritocracy, or we can have equal outcomes by ancestry group; unless the information now coming in by every post from the human sciences is all utterly wrong, we cannot have both. Yet both, of course, is exactly what we insist on having, and *diversity* is our current attempt at squaring this unhappy circle.

Never mind. *Diversity* is a fine book, full of cogent arguments, curious facts, and nasty slimy things that burrowed away un-

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noticed under the foundations of our culture till Professor Wood turned them up with his trowel. Given this "prevailing structure of taboos," we should be grateful for such a vigorous and literate defense of truth, sanity, and scholarship against the ever-pressing forces of unreason; and to any minor logical flaws in such a defense, we should turn the same blind eye that Peter Wood has turned to the eight-hundred-pound gorilla on his living-room sofa.

The good German

Hermann Kurzke Thomas Mann: life as a work of art: a biography. Translated by Leslie Willson. Princeton University Press, 582 pages, $35

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

In *Phaedrus*, which inspired *Death in Venice*, Plato writes that when the lover "beholds a god-like face or a physical form which truly reflects ideal beauty, he first of all shivers and experiences something of the dread which the vision itself inspired; next he gazes upon it and worships it as if it were a god, and, if he were not afraid of being thought an utter madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a divinity." This passage, charged with powerful tensions, contrasts the vision of an ideal beauty, a godlike face and body, a divine and beloved image, worthy of worship, to the shattering effect it has on the lover who perceives it: shivers, dread, fear, madness, self-abasement and self-sacrifice.

Plato's thought also explains a great deal about Mann's homoerotic life. As an adolescent and adult he fell in love with several handsome boys and men, but never had sexual relations with any of them. His bisexual *Sehnsucht* gave him penetrating insight into human nature and enabled him to create some of the most interesting characters in modern literature. He transformed his idealized longing for young men into Hans Hansen in "Tonio Kröger," Pribislav Hippe in *The Magic Mountain*, Rudi Schwerdtfeger in *Doctor Faustus*, and the eponymous hero of *Felix Krull*. In 1981 Richard Winston noted the pattern of sexual displacement in Mann's life and art. Tonio's attachment to Hans Hansen is soon transmuted into his love for Ingeborg Holm. Hans Castorp's memories of Pribislav are changed into his infatuation for Clavdia Chauchat. Adrian Leverkühn's relationship with Rudi is followed by his decision to marry Marie Godeau.

Hermann Kurzke, who never mentions Plato (the only index reference is to a blank page), has an obsessive, even prurient interest in Mann's suppressed passion and celibate homoeroticism. He identifies the real models for Mann's fictional characters, nails everything down to biographical fact, and tries to "out" Mann with what he concedes are "biographically unreliable" novels. In *Death in Venice* Mann warned that a knowledge of the sources of inspiration undermines the effect of art. Kurzke's reductive method demeans the power of Mann's imagination and diminishes his struggle to sublimate the forbidden desires that were essential to his fiction. Mann gloried in the irony of his own self-abasement before the beautiful and beloved but shallow and selfish creatures. In the doomed love of the suspect and anti-social pederast, Gustave von Aschenbach, Mann found the perfect pattern for the artist's desperate struggle to recapture the ideal form of sensual beauty, to unite passion with thought, grace with wisdom, the real with the ideal.

Kurzke's Teutonic, pedantic, long-winded and heavy-handed study, moving from work to work and theme to theme in short, discrete *feuilletons* (with ponderous titles and sudden transitions), is literary criticism dressed up as biography. The Chronicle at the head of each section provides the skeleton of biographical facts, which is not fleshed out in the text. The chronology is chaotic: Mann's move to Switzerland in 1952 is mentioned just after his birth in 1875 and "The Path to Marriage" comes *after* he's

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actually married. Kurzke introduces important characters—the childhood friend Otto Grautoff, the poet Ernst Bertram, the critic Paul Amman, and Agnes Meyer, whose husband was the publisher of the *Washington Post*, as well as "Cynthia" and "Franzl" without explaining who they are. He claims that Mann "had no real friends," but ignores his vital friendships with Hesse, Freud, Einstein, the conductor Bruno Walter, the philosopher Erich Kahler, and the classicist Karl Karényi. Kurzke does not describe how Erika Mann rescued the manuscript of the *Joseph* novels after her father's house in Munich had been seized by the Gestapo, nor Mann's dangerous operation for lung cancer in 1946, which tested his characteristic "sympathy for death" while he was writing *Doctor Faustus*.

The shameful number of typographical errors in this book does a great disservice to the author and disgraces the university press. There are variant spellings of the same name: Kerensky, Judah, Katia, Maria and Esmeralda. The same work appears as *A Sketch of My Life* and *Summary of My Life*, the same journal as *Das Zwanzigste Jahrhundert* and *Das XX. Jahrhundert*. Louis XIV appears as Ludwig XIV; the familiar Clavdia is confusingly printed as the Germanic Clawdia; and the reference to *The Fireman* is completely opaque. There are many repetitive passages, many long paragraphs of bulletin-like snippets from Mann's letters, and twelve solid pages of salacious extracts from his diaries without a single word of comment or analysis. The notes, bibliography, and index entries for Mann and his works are omitted from the American edition, and the source of the quotations is often unclear.

There are several glaring contradictions. Was Mann's father cultured or not? Did Mann meet Katia in 1903? Was Erika or Klaus his oldest child? Did he live in Pacific Palisades or Santa Monica? Did he have a "love affair" with Cynthia? Kurzke is puzzled by Mann's reference to Antilochus, the son of Nestor and trusted friend of Achilles. He calls Mann "a lover of Communism," though he refused lucrative invitations to live in East Germany and the extremely valuable Stalin Prize. Kurzke also goes in for portentous but meaningless statements: "The writer does not recall any reluctance to exchange the dark of his mother's womb for the light of day"; Thomas and his brother Heinrich "must have talked about a lot of things"; "Anyone who wants to be a storyteller must have something special to say"; "An orgasm that analyzes itself doesn't even happen"; "Smoking is spiritualization."

This *guazzabuglio* (to use one of Settembrini's favorite words), highly praised in the German press and in the *TLS*, is compounded by a horrendous translation, which forces one to reread many sentences in order to grasp the approximate meaning. "And because to plumb the human soul/ The urge has also captured me scornfully" and "Here is a man most highly lacking:/ Fully great and small passions packing" as well as many other torture-to-read monstrosities: "Although all the records mentioned to this point bear the stamp of later literary re-formation, we are actually not justified in doubting this statement, for reports about unhappy childhood experiences are not present" and Mann's *Letters* "also included a communication to Jonas Lesser, from which Adorno had to conclude that he supposedly inflated himself with pride in a not very pleasant way in the light of the spotlight that Thomas Mann had directed at him."

A few telling details occasionally enliven the inert narrative. Mann was physically assaulted by a thieving servant who, representing "the oppressed class," was exonerated when he took her to court. A visit to his wife's Swiss sanatorium in 1912 provided the original impetus for *The Magic Mountain*, but her surviving X-ray shows no sign of tuberculosis and we owe the novel to a misdiagnosis. In 1925, the year after that novel appeared, Hagedorn & Sons named their cigar *Thomas Mann*. After a political speech in Berlin in 1930, Mann disguised

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himself with snow goggles and narrowly escaped from Nazi thugs who didn't want to get blood on their rented tuxedos. A suitcase filled with precious manuscripts, left behind when he went into exile, was entrusted to their loyal chauffeur. He notified the secret police who, after examining it, obligingly sent it on to Switzerland. In partial exchange for royalties stolen by the East Germans, Mann accepted a tailor-made Russian mink coat with an otter collar.

When discussing Mann's literary technique, Kurzke argues that he "preferred finding to inventing" and that *Joseph* was the first work without human models. But he fails to see the larger pattern in Mann's art. After *The Magic Mountain*, the last work based on personal experience, he turned to mythology and the Bible in the *Joseph* tetralogy; to the lives of Goethe, Nietzsche, and St. Gregory in *The Beloved Returns*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *The Holy Sinner*; and finally completed the *Felix Krull* fragment, abandoned for forty years.

Katia Mann was the ideal wife for a writer: more beautiful than Frieda Lawrence or Zelda Fitzgerald, more loyal than Jessie Conrad or Nora Joyce, and more intelligent than all of them. Mann, a remote but loving father, was quick to forgive the faults of his six children and to let them have their own way. Five of them wrote books about him, and Kurzke traces their careers. But he does not explain why Erika, Klaus, and Golo were homosexual (his grandson Frido, the model for Nepo in *Doctor Faustus*, also "showed all the signs of homosexuality"); why Erika, Klaus and Michael were addicted to drugs; and why Klaus and Michael killed themselves.

Mann opposed the Nazis throughout the 1920s, went into exile right after Hitler took power in January 1933, and became the acknowledged head of the (mostly Jewish) émigrés. During the uncontrollable inflation of 1923 his father's fortune and his own savings had vanished, his war bonds had become worthless, and nothing remained of Katia's family millions but the art collection (her father said he "lived from wall to mouth"). In exile he lost his houses and all of his possessions, his manuscripts and correspondence, his royalties and Nobel Prize money, his citizenship and honorary doctorate, his publisher, identity, and reputation in his native country. His house in Munich was turned over to a foundation dedicated to breeding racially pure Aryans. After he'd suggested that the German idea of womanhood was the cow, his enemies urged Himmler to put him in Dachau. Mann had earned the moral right to declare: "Where I am, there is Germany."

Mann made an astonishingly swift and effective adjustment to America—first in Princeton, then in California. His name sounded English. He knew the language, had the fame and prestige of the Nobel Prize, was married to a handsome and charming wife, had talented children with literary reputations of their own, received the powerful patronage of Agnes Meyer, was a friend of President Roosevelt, and had a bestseller when *Joseph the Provider* (influenced by Roosevelt's New Deal policies) was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Kurzke says nothing about the brilliant circle of émigrés in Los Angeles—Heinrich Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Franz Werfel, Arnold Schönberg—who gathered in the salon of Garbo's screenwriter Salka Viertel. Kurzke is weak on the influence of Mann's fourteen years (1938–1952) in America ("he eats pancakes with maple syrup. America democratically loosens up his somewhat stiff manner"), and underestimates Thomas's hatred of Heinrich's alcoholic, sluttish, and suicidal ex-barmaid wife.

In America Mann wrote *Doctor Faustus*, perhaps his greatest novel, in which autobiography, Faustian myth, Lutheran theology, Shakespearean parody, Nietzschean pathology, atonal music theory, and Nazi history all coalesce. The musical, military, pathological and political themes brilliantly merge at the end of the novel as the four stages of Adrian's disease—migraines, infec-

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tion, remission and collapse—tragically fuse with Germany's predisposition to Reformation-inspired demonology, choice of Nazism, decade of military conquest, and apocalyptic self-destruction.

Mann found it impossible to live in postwar Germany. Though he was loaded down with honors, the abyss remained. After a reading at Frankfurt, he thought: "how much blood probably sticks to all those hands that I had to shake today?" When he went to bed, his hosts bellowed out old Nazi songs. And the Russians continued to use the convenient facilities at the Buchenwald concentration camp. At the same time, as the Cold War frosted up and Joe McCarthy began his hunts for Communists, the FBI compiled a thousand-page dossier on Mann, and the new American citizen expected a humiliating summons from the House Un-American Activities Committee. Believing that the mania for persecution, "the hysterical, irrational and blind hatred of Communists presents a danger far more horrible than the native Communism," Mann moved to Switzerland and bought a house in Kilchberg, with a view of Lake Zurich and the blue mountains beyond. In August 1955, at the age of eighty, he seemed to be recovering from a thrombosis in the leg when he suddenly collapsed and died of an aneurysm in an abdominal artery. He did not want to be cremated because, he cryptically said, "it may hurt," and was buried in Fluntern cemetery near James Joyce.

Mann's intellectually complex and demanding fiction, filled with intriguing symbols and allusions, raises many provocative questions. What makes an artist? Why is he opposed to conventional society? Why must he suffer? How does he create? How is he inspired by "dangerous" music? How is disease related to art? Mann's elegant style, penetrating irony, subtle wit, artistic brilliance, probing intelligence, depth of meaning, insight into the malaise of European culture and half-century of creative genius make him the greatest novelist of all time.

Mann has been well served by his English-language biographers—Nigel Hamilton (1978), Richard Winston (1981), Ronald Hayman (1994), Donald Prater (1995), and Anthony Heilbut (1996)—all of whom are superior to Kurzke and make his book (first published in 1999) seem *vieux jeu*. The publication of Mann's *Six Early Stories* (1997), *The Letters of Heinrich and Thomas Mann* (1998), Gilbert Adair's *The Real Tadzio* (2001), and the recent biographies testify to his enduring reputation. Mann is one of the rare writers—Samuel Johnson, Henry James, Chekhov and Nabokov—whose life and character, under the pressure of intense biographical scrutiny, seem noble.

Mann successfully fused art and life, enjoyed a long and fruitful marriage, had the intelligence to recognize the errors of his early reactionary opinions and the courage to change them (most German nationalists in the Great War became supporters of the Nazi party), adapted to an exile that cost him nearly all his German readers, became the leading spokesman for the anti-Nazi writers, had a triumphant career in the United States, worked selflessly for the benefit of the European exiles, bravely opposed the anti-Communist hysteria in America, and, despite political upheavals and endless distractions, remained dedicated to his literary vocation. He was a man of magnanimity and intelligence whose mind, harnessing the threatening demons of his time, remained creative and alert until the final hour.

Aspiration and reality

Doris Lessing The Sweetest Dream. HarperCollins, 478 pages, $26.95

reviewed by Paul Hollander

The Sweetest Dream continues Lessing's longstanding preoccupation with the intimate connection, most insistently proclaimed in our times by radical feminists, between the personal and the political. The

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book may also be seen as a further and most explicit stage in Lessing's journey of distancing herself from her old leftist convictions and from all radical-utopian beliefs. What she seeks to convey here has certainly been proposed before, by philosophers, political scientists, and clear-headed intellectuals: that there is no political or social solution for personal problems, especially for the most difficult ones. Likewise, sweeping schemes of social engineering founder on their own unintended consequences and the imponderables of human nature. The determined mixing of the personal and the political, more often than not, yields unpleasant results.

This is a novel mainly about England in the 1960s, but it spans half a century from World War II until the late 1990s. In a short preface, Lessing expresses the hope that she "managed to recapture the spirit of the Sixties" (she does, most successfully) and conveys justifiable irritation with the (British) Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament ("there has never been a more hysterical, noisy and irrational campaign"), which embodied many of the questionable beliefs and attitudes of the period.

Unlike most books focusing on the 1960s and written on either side of the Atlantic, and especially on ours, *The Sweetest Dream* is not infused with nostalgia for that supposedly golden era of youthful idealism and personal liberation. Quite to the contrary, Lessing embarks on a highly critical, although not totally unsympathetic, examination of the period and the types of people who seemed to set and reflect its tone most characteristically. I can only think of Saul Bellow (and especially his *Mr. Sammler's Planet*) as offering a comparably profound critical reflection of that era's problematic aspirations and the human beings emblematic of them, who firmly believed that all good things are compatible, including no-holds-barred "self-realization," warm communal relationships, and the revolutionary transformation of all social institutions and practices. This was "the sweetest dream."

It was a period when large numbers of people were seized by the conviction that what mattered most were good and pure intentions, which by themselves vindicated the actions they inspired. Even more remarkably, these people believed that human love, kindness, and a sense of solidarity could be extended and expanded effortlessly and without discrimination.

In this book these impulses find expression in, among other things, the commendable but somewhat muddled generosity of the major character, Frances (a "neurotic nurturer" as "the kids" see her); she takes into her spacious home various "strays" who belong to "a tribe of youngsters 'disturbed' for one reason or another"—confusedly rebellious middle-class youth (including the offspring of her former spouse). These young people habitually refer to their parents as "shits." Frances the nurturer is a kind and largely apolitical woman who nonetheless absorbed through much of her life the beliefs and impulses prevalent in the subcultures of the 1960s. She is a victim both of these beliefs and of her own decency.

It is her former husband, "comrade Johnny," who is the prime exhibit of the foolishness, irresponsibility, and hypocrisy of which a thoroughly politicized human being is capable. The son of wealthy parents, he was educated at Eton, but as a young man became involved with the British Communist party; he remains through much of his life a full-time functionary. Staunchly pro-Soviet until almost the very end of "the Soviet experiment," later in life Johnny switches to a more broadly based leftist "third-worldism," admiring Castro and assorted African dictators. What does not change is his deep alienation from his own country and his despising of capitalism; if indeed it is capitalism that is the deepest animating impulse behind Johnny's relentless hostility toward his own society and the non-socialist Western world.

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Johnny exemplifies what happens when the political realm invades and absorbs the personal: the withering of the personal. He is never at a loss to spout soothing (or rousing) agit-prop rhetoric, but is singularly "challenged" in the department of ordinary human concerns and feelings. He is serenely unconcerned with the welfare of his children from his failed marriages; he supports them neither financially nor emotionally. He is a windbag and inveterate freeloader, a parasite with a clear conscience getting free meals from his former first wife, whom he holds in great contempt on account of her low level of political consciousness. ("My wife . . . does not understand that the Struggle must come before family obligations.") Why worry about such mundane matters when you are dedicating your life to the liberation of the masses and the future of humanity? Life holds no mysteries for him, and he has a ready answer and the remedy for every question and problem. In this, he reminds me of Homais, the pharmacist in *Madame Bovary*, another irresponsible, cheerfully impersonal windbag, beholden to soothing platitudes extracted from the beliefs of the French Enlightenment.

American readers may be surprised by the many similarities between the ethos and representatives of the 1960s in England and in this country. For example, in the English private school of the novel, "pupils came and went, with little regard for time-tables or exams. When teachers suggested a more disciplined approach, they might be reminded of the principles that had established the school, self-development being the main one." Similarly familiar is the physical appearance of the people populating these pages who wear the "current uniforms of non-conformity," and are described as "Che Guevara clones." In England too, in these circles, the epithet "fascism" was thrown around with abandon: "they all used the word fascist as easily as they said fuck, or shit, not necessarily meaning much more than this was somebody they disapproved of." The mentally ill, these English youngsters believed, "are just like us." The tribal massacres in Africa were dismissed as products of a "different culture," another expression of cultural diversity that should not prompt "judgemental" attitudes. A group of true believers (in the novel) could listen to the revelations of a former inmate of the Gulag "as if the tale did not concern them." They are people (like the American believers in the innocence of the Rosenbergs) "who cannot change once their minds are made up."

These similarities are all the more surprising since the two countries and societies in question are vastly different; Britain was neither involved in the Vietnam war, nor did she have to face the historic burden of slavery—two factors frequently invoked to explain the social-political movements of the 1960s in the United States and the deep alienation their participants displayed. What the alienated had in common in both societies—as this novel suggests—was a combination of privileged background, a sense of political and economic security and entitlement (compatible with all sorts of neurotic needs and symptoms), and a profound belief that the prevailing social-political institutions and arrangements were self-evidently and utterly rotten and worthless. This complex of attitudes helps to explain, for example, why most of the privileged youngsters in the book consider shoplifting both an entertaining and lucrative hobby and a desirable form of political struggle against "the system," against capitalism. ("When he [one of the characters] arrived at the LSE he was delighted that to steal clothes, books, anything one fancied, as a means of undermining the capitalist system was taken for granted. To actually pay for something, well, how politically naive can one get?")

Lessing does not have a clear answer as to the root of this malaise, of "this rage . . . too deep in some part of the collective unconscious to reason with." The closest she comes to pointing to a source is the British version of the generational conflict and incomplete or malfunctioning families. There

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are numerous glimpses of parents' self-centeredness and irresponsibility, often associated with the period's grand notions of self-realization. Such parental neglect helps to explain the mentality and rootlessness of this small sample of the English "youth culture."

It is not hard to understand how children who grow up without a father or with two indifferent, uninvolved parents become susceptible to a deep sense of grievance, which may or may not take a political form, depending on the prevailing social conditions. The sons of Johnny and Frances are obvious examples, although, given their grotesquely irresponsible and largely absent father, they become scornful of his politics. Arguably they belong to the offspring of "a generation of Believers, now discredited, [who] had given birth to children who disowned their parents' beliefs, but admired their dedication. . . . What faith! What passion! What idealism!" Here again is a close parallel with the so-called "red diaper babies" in this country, who became prominent 1960s activists, and subsequently academics, writing reverent studies of the American communist movement without fully identifying with its failed policies.

Another virtually separate part of the novel takes place in an African country named Zimlia, which closely resembles present-day Zimbabwe and is seen through the eyes of one of the novel's characters, a young, idealistic doctor who takes a job there to help the poor. Her experiences of the pervasive corruption, brutality, and economic stagnation—rarely encountered in Western works of fiction (or non-fiction) about Africa—is further illustration of the colossal and disheartening gap separating theory from practice, good intentions from good results, and of a spectacular failure of decolonialization. The new, indigenous elites are greedy, cynical, and ruthless, and no more concerned with the welfare of the masses than their predecessors were. Another sweet dream shattered.

The greatest strength of this powerful novel is its compelling focus on the timeless tension between idealistic social-political aspiration and the dark side of human nature. Fallible and flawed human beings, torn between numerous conflicting values and desires, are bound to fail in creating a social order in which there is no chasm between the private and the public, the personal and the political, good intentions and good results. As Lessing shows, "the sweetest dream" of such harmony and fulfillment will likely continue to haunt and elude us.

Laughing matters

Christie Davies The Mirth of Nations. Transaction, 360 pages, $35.95

reviewed by Kenneth Minogue

"I like jokes" remarks the hero of Peter Ustinov's play *Romanov and Juliet*, alerting the audience at once to the fact that he has no sense of humor. Liking jokes doesn't exactly prove you have no sense of humor, but most social theorists won't give you the benefit of the doubt. Humor is a broad-spectrum concept and jokes are only one of its departments. The progenitor of a recent mathematical formula for happiness has incorporated a variable "H" standing for "higher order needs," and humor is taken to be one of these. A sense of humor is the thing women say they most like in a man, but that certainly doesn't mean that they want to marry a stand-up comedian. What they mean is someone who doesn't explode in rage at their latest adventure with the joint credit card.

Jokes are under suspicion for many reasons. Not only are they a rather plebeian form of jocularity, but the theorists are busy looking for the passions—probably deplorable—concealed beneath the guffaw. The philosopher Hobbes was one of the first. He defined laughter as "sudden glory," assimilating it no doubt to our amusement at seeing people slip on banana skins. Freud thought that a joke was a sneaky way of

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defeating repression, of saying what was otherwise unsayable. It has been the direly literal-minded twentieth century that took these possibilities to heart. Ethnic jokes seemed to insult other races, and perhaps, under a light dusting of laughter, that might be their point! Thus did political correctness add another province to its empire.

It is indeed true that aggression sometimes clothes itself in pretended laughter. Human beings are both laughing animals and also creatures that delight in a sense of superiority, and the one characteristic can conceal the other. Poor James Bond had a little finger broken by a torturing brute in a early novel; as Bond cried out, his tormentor sneered: "Where's ya sensayuma?" The political activist in London who recently took a bat to a statue of Margaret Thatcher and lopped off its head described his act as a piece of artistic expression adding: "We can ill afford to ever lose our sense of humor. I was left with no choice other than to do this act of satirical humor."

These are the considerations that set Christie Davies, a Welshman who is professor of sociology at the University of Reading in England, towards writing *The Mirth of Nations*. Davies is a veteran investigator of jokes, and broadly speaking, he takes his business here as being to save the joke from the message-mongers and restore it to harmless play and laughter. He recognizes as a widespread tendency the confusion between playing with aggression in jokes on the one hand, and real aggression on the other. There are plenty of jokes recounted in the book, but its basic purpose is to undermine misplaced profundity in joke studies.

All those jokes about dumb Polacks, for example—"How do you catch a Pole? By slamming the toilet lid on him as he's taking a drink"—might suggest a background of ethnic conflict between Polish immigrants and other immigrant groups in America. Davies refutes this thesis by the simple device of showing that there's no evidence from any other source for such conflict.

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In any case, the Poles are just as amused by them as others. Polish jokes are similar to the dirty Newfie jokes told in Canada. Perhaps these might be expressing genuine contempt and hostility towards the inhabitants of Newfoundland? Not at all, argues Davies. The Newfies tell the same jokes about themselves and they are part of the self-image of a rural tourist area.

Davies is particularly good on the ambiguity of jokes. The Scots and the Jews have in common a tendency to tell self-denigratory jokes. The Scots, for example, slyly reveal a character of canny meanness. Davies argues that in repertoires, what looks like self-denigration is actually a form of concealed boasting. The jokes tend to merge into mere wit and metaphor, and I have to say that at various points the sheer feebleness of some of the Scottish jokes gave me a deep respect for the scholarly dedication of the theorists. The jokes theorist is not an anthologist and is at the mercy of his archive.

Any Australian reading the Davies chapter on Jewish women and Australian men will probably find it depressing. Australia was long a largely bachelor society filled with men liable to drink to excess. The result was a plethora of jokes about vomiting that constitute a good reason for running a mile. Anyone seeking to understand why Australia is a world exporter of enraged radical feminists (Germaine Greer, *et al.*) need not go much further than jokes such as:

> "I've got to dash—I'm on a promise to use the rodeo position."
>
> "What the hell is the rodeo position?"
>
> "Well, you get her down on the bed and start giving it to her doggy fashion. As soon as she starts to enjoy it you whisper in her ear 'that's how Tracey at the pub likes it.' Then you have to see how long you can stay on."

Awful though it is, this actually is funny, and the reason is, I think, that the humor arises from mocking an almost innocently mechanical reaction to a stimulus. And this suggests that one point of jokes is to celebrate spontaneity in human conduct. No real Jewish mother will burst into tears when she sees her son wearing one of the two ties she gave him. Jokes have taught her better.

We learn from jokes, as we learn from everything, and being mocked is an important part of growing up. "All too often," Davies remarks, "humor scholars treat jokes as if they can be reduced to clear, serious objective statements which imply single meanings, and then analyze them in a way that is ambiguous, obscure, untestable and subjective—in a word, a joke." The importance of *The Mirth of Nations* is that it takes jokes back from the theorists and returns them to the comedians. And that's all of us.

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Notebook

Cliquez ici for Alexandria

by Theodore Dalrymple

A Greek Cypriot medical colleague of mine sometimes pays us a social visit, and I ask her as a favor to recite Cavafy in Greek, a language I do not speak or understand. The sound of the poetry alone is to me beautiful: but knowing it in translation, I am able to catch a word or two. The experience moves me deeply for reasons that I cannot quite analyze.

Her husband, as it happens, is a Greek from Alexandria, also a doctor, born in the year of Cavafy's death. His has been what to me seems a dispiriting trajectory in life, from the capital of memory (in Lawrence Durrell's phrase) to an English suburb where memory is abjured: from a life of cosmopolitan cafés to one of attention to the banal and mostly imaginary ailments of the bored and unhappy. But I suppose that everywhere, looked at aright, is exotic: it is the quality of the observer, not what is observed, that is important. Perhaps the Greek Alexandrian doctor took to heart, and not merely to mind, Cavafy's warning about the impossibility of finding fulfilment elsewhere, and therefore the futility of attributing dissatisfaction to one's geographical location: You say, "I'll go to another country, to other shores./ I'll succeed in finding another city, better than this,/ Where all my efforts are doomed in advance."

You won't find a new country,
  you won't discover new shores.
The city will follow you.
You will walk the same streets,
  you'll grow old in the same quarters,

You hair will turn white
  in the same houses.
Wherever you are, you'll arrive
  in the same city.
For you there is neither boat
  nor road that will take you elsewhere.

But in any case, the Alexandria of the doctor's youth—the Alexandria that brings out the sighs and exclamation marks in writers—has gone, extinguished forever by the world war, the fervor of anti-multicultural Egyptian nationalism, and British and French maladroitness.

It is a commonplace that Alexandria in its cosmopolitan heyday, when a third of the population was of foreign origin, acted as a powerful stimulus to the literary imagination, though—or is it because?—the city's true vocation was making money by such activities as cotton-broking and trans-shipment. The epidemiology of literary achievement is an interesting but unexplored field: everyone says that Alexandria inspired an extraordinary literary output, but do the poems of Cavafy and Ungaretti (the Italian born in Alexandria), the two books of E. M. Forster, one of them a guide and history, and the *Alexandria Quartet* of Lawrence Durrell and the trilogy of Stratis Tsirkas represent more or less than might have been

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expected in the circumstances? What is the relevant standard of comparison? And do birds of passage such as Forster and Durrell count as Alexandrian?

Be that as it may, you can't find a copy of Cavafy in English or French in Alexandrian bookshops today. One bookseller, who had been educated in French, like many of his social class over a certain age, and whose bookshop had a creditable amount of literature in both French and English, was bemused by the numbers of inquiries he received from foreigners for books by Cavafy. "Why are foreigners so interested in Cavafy?" he asked. "Why is he so important? What did he do?"

I replied that he was a great poet: though whether this was the whole answer to his question, I am not certain. I remarked that his poems were still in print, and had been translated into French by Marguerite Yourcenar, whereupon a glint came into his eye: the sprit of the old Alexandria revived. It would be good business to import Cavafy and sell him to the foreigners, he said: and I promised to send him a list of editions still in print. I had become, in effect, a Cavafy-broker, though unpaid; and I could not help but think of the comment written in English in the visitor's book of the Cavafy Museum, at No. 4, Rue Lepsis (now No. 4, Sharia Sharm el Sheikh), in the flat where Cavafy lived for the last twenty-five years of his life, by a Greek tourist:

> Kavafis Museum reminds me of candles illuminating the darkness of the modern mechanical dim and dark world, and provides a contemporary cure and therapy for a mind nostalgic for a golden age in the past.

A golden age? Surely it is to misunderstand the melancholy of Cavafy to believe that a Golden Age once existed or could ever have existed, human life being what it is. But certainly Cavafy, who is usually described as having lived in poverty, lived in an age in which, to judge from the well-proportioned, high-ceilinged rooms of his flat, luxurious (or perhaps I should say luxuriant) poverty was possible, as it is not now: such luxuriance no doubt having been dependent upon the existence of a deep social stratum of even greater impoverishment. A rise in general wealth renders impossible impoverishment in its genteel form.

There are still remnants of the old Alexandria (I'm not talking of the very old Alexandria, of course, whose remains are even more exiguous, but of that which passed away in the 1950s). The Jews have departed, all but a hundred of them, but the synagogue on the Rue Nabi Daniel is still there, heavily guarded according to my guidebook: the heavy guard consisting of one policeman reading a newspaper for hours on end, who did not look as if he were expecting an attack at any time in the near future.

The Pâtisserie des Délices is still open, as faded as a famous old café in the capital of a communist country—though the Egyptian pâtisserie and Turkish coffee are still excellent, inconceivable under communism. And I stayed at the Cecil Hotel, in the room once occupied (according to the plaque on the door) by a famous writer called "Agatha Christy." The lobby and ballroom of the Cecil were once the center of Alexandria's social life, at least in the sense of le tout Alexandrie (there are still countries in the world in which what happens in the lobby of the capital's best—or only good—hotel is more important than what happens in the parliament).

But the Cecil has changed: it is now owned by a huge French hotel chain rather than by the Metzger family, one books by internet (cliquez ici), and though the lift is still of the old iron cage variety, pop music is pumped through the lobby like poison gas. Gone are the dusty palms in the lobby mentioned by Durrell, which I rather regretted: small material tokens of human frailty console me, while too much antiseptic efficiency daunts and intimidates me. Secretly, then, I was rather relieved when the water supply gave out for a couple of hours each day: certainly, it was one in the eye for the world of cliquez ici.

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The desperate poverty of Alexandria has gone: or at least the children are gone who were described by Durrell, so listless that they do not brush away the flies that settle on their eyelids. Desperation is, of course, a mental quality, not to be deduced in simple fashion from the material conditions of life, and no doubt the present-day Alexandrians have, as everyone has, reasons for desperation: but even the most skeptical about the benefits of material progress could scarcely lament the disappearance of signs of childhood destitution.

Now that the passions of Egyptian nationalism, if not quite spent, have at least abated, its aims having been largely achieved, Alexandria wishes to reconvert itself into an international city: its past, both recent and distant, being too glorious for it to remain long content as an Egyptian provincial city. And the means by which it hopes once more to become the pharos of the eastern Mediterranean is the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a huge modern library that took fifteen years to build and that opened at the end of last year.

Having been designed by a European architect—a Norwegian—it is hardly surprising that the exterior is not a thing of beauty (though whether it will ever pass into nothingness is another question entirely). The leadership of the world having definitively departed from European shores some decades ago, European architects strain after, but never convincingly (which is to say, unselfconsciously) achieve modernity. It is as if they were all sons of Palladio, stricken with severe cases of the Oedipus complex.

From the outside, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina resembles nothing so much as a fall-out shelter of Pharaonic dimensions, with a large car showroom incongruously attached, just in case—presumably—the nuclear war doesn't take place after all. To say that the design lacks unity and harmony is an understatement: it is the twelve-tone system made architecture.

The interior, however, is of a very different quality. Cool and bathed in natural light, it is a vast and comfortable amphitheater for readers: two thousand of them, who can be accommodated without strain or crowding. No attempt has been made here to arrest the attention of the jaded retina by means of an arbitrary juxtaposition or by brutal angularity. The result is suitably and functionally restful on the eye.

As yet, of course, there are nowhere near two thousand readers, nor even two hundred. Indeed, there are more uniformed staff, looking distinctly like policemen, than there are readers. Moreover, the few readers whom I was able to observe were mostly reading textbooks of marketing: not exactly a reawakening of the spirit of Demetrius of Phaleron, the first librarian of Alexandria. The holdings of the Bibliotheca are as yet small—250,000 volumes—and probably not strong enough in any field for genuinely scholarly activity.

My first intimation of its holdings was not encouraging to say the least: a notice pointing to United Nations publications, and those of the European Commission, the kind of publications that it is difficult to get anyone to accept free of charge, and the mere thought of which is sufficient to produce a numbness in the brain. Approaching a stack at random, my eye alighted on a periodical called *Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library and Information Issues*, published by the British Museum. I opened it, also at random: and there before me was an article entitled "Marketing Strategy at the National Library of the Netherlands in the Light of an External Evaluation." A small mugshot of the author made him look like a criminal caught in flagrante, or a madman shying away from the camera because he believed that the camera emitted special rays to control his thoughts. With mounting excitement, I read on:

> In 1998, the National Library of the Netherlands was evaluated by a committee of external experts. Their conclusion was, in short, that

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> the [Library] was right on course strategically [and] supplied high-quality products.

If I were a librarian, and I'd written that, I think I too would shy away from the camera.

It is, of course, easy to mock the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, its shelves for 8,000,000 volumes as yet 97 percent empty. Was ever a worthwhile library built up by the in-gathering of official verbiage? The verbiage is produced in such torrential quantities these days that even this vast shelf-space will soon prove insufficient: it sent by donors irrespective of whether it is of any use to the recipient. The infamous snow-ploughs sent by the Russians to the newly independent Ghana were of immense utility by comparison. Can it really be that any scholar will travel thousands of miles to consult *Alexandria*—the journal, not the city?

No doubt there will be critics also who would argue that the Bibliotheca is irrelevant to the needs, or worse still wasteful of the resources of, a country such as Egypt, a fifth of whose population is unemployed and where underemployment is so rife that it is impossible to urinate in a public lavatory without being closely observed by an attendant in the hope of a tip. The proponents of the Brechtian standpoint (which is to say grub first, culture afterwards) will argue that there should be no expenditure, either of effort or treasure, upon any little luxuries like the arts and humanities until social problems such as ophthalmia and vitamin deficiency have been solved. The late Professor Rawls of Harvard would no doubt have argued that unless the Bibliotheca Alexandrina benefited the worst-off Egyptian, and benefited him more than any conceivable alternative, it should not have been built.

Apart from the slight empirical difficulty of deciding whether the Bibliotheca will or will not benefit the fellahin of Upper Egypt, this miserable standpoint, had it ever occurred to anyone in the past to take it seriously, would have rendered all great cultural achievement and institutions—Harvard not least of them—impossible. No doubt the Bibliotheca has its absurd aspects about it, as well as elements of vainglory: and perhaps a lack of funds will dictate that it will fill with meretricious tripe. But at the very least it represents an implicit acknowledgement of the ideal of the disinterested search for knowledge, truth, and wisdom in a region of the world in which that ideal died a long time ago, and which has come under persistent attack in our own little groves of academe.

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *The One Abiding*, by Frederick Morgan (Story Line Press, $11), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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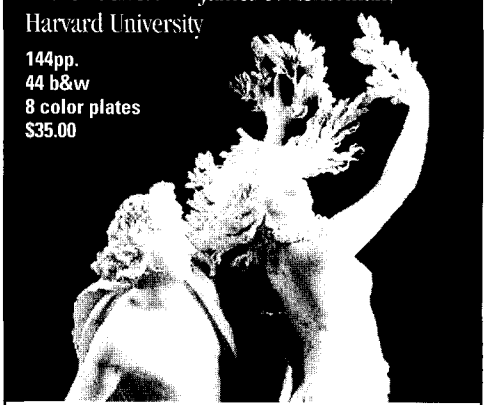

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A critical fever chart of our age

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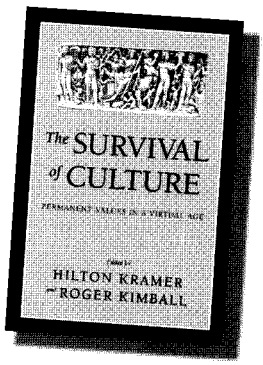
Permanent Values in a Virtual Age



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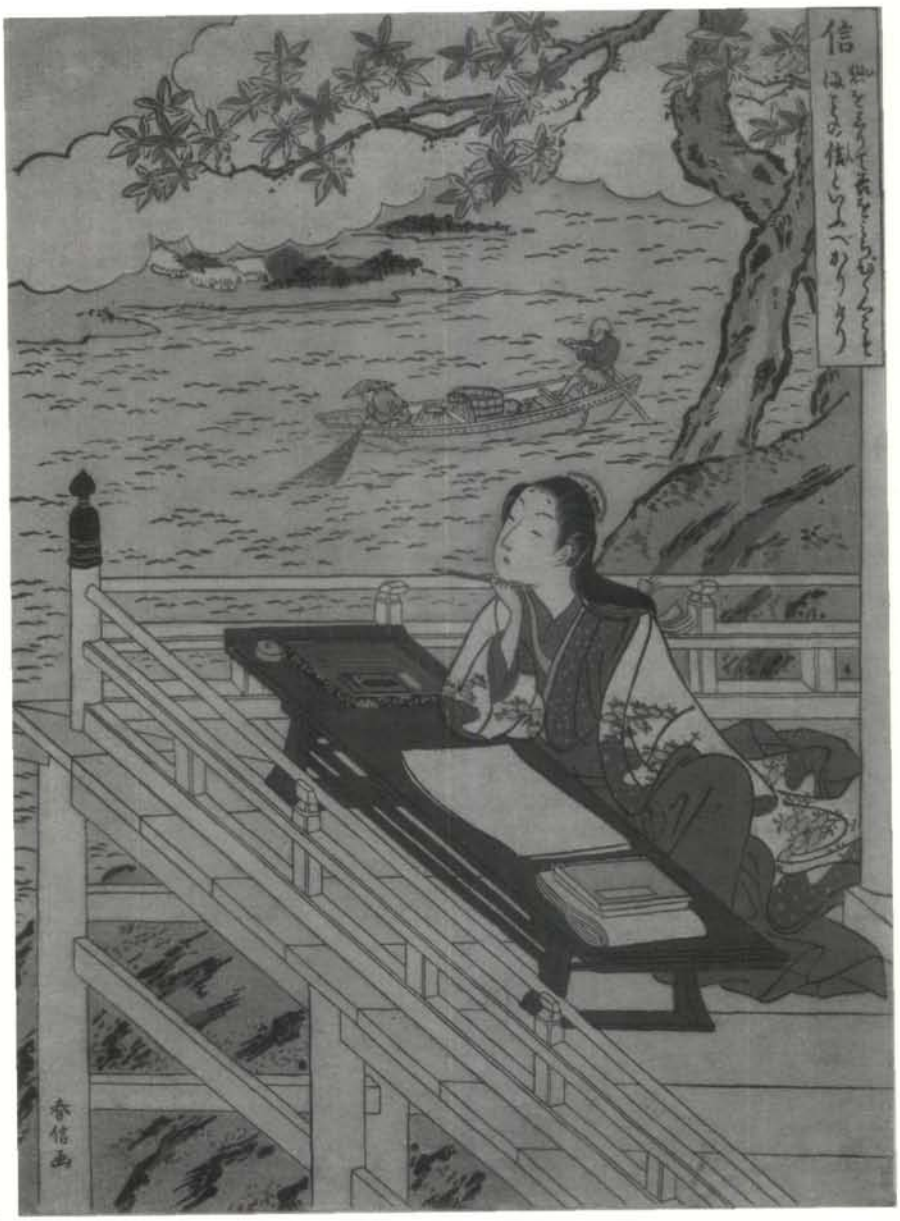

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